

# Bandwagon

THE JOURNAL OF  
THE CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

JULY-AUGUST 1992

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# BANDWAGON

## THE JOURNAL OF THE CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Vol. 36, No. 4

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### THIS MONTH'S COVER

Wild animal trainer Bert Nelson, a.k.a. Cardburt Nelson Snyder, appeared with the Al G. Barnes show in the early 1930s with Terrell Jacobs and Mable Stark.

He was sent to the Hagenbeck-Wallace show in 1935 to replace Clyde Beatty who had left for the new Cole show.

A special lithograph of Nelson was designed by Erie for the 1935 Hagenbeck-Wallace-Forepaugh-Sells season. The design was also used on the program reproduced on this month's cover.

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## CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY FINANCIAL STATEMENT May 1, 1991 to April 30, 1992

Cash beginning 5-1-91		12,228.91
Income	43,550.79	
Expense	41,995.32	<u>1,555.47</u>
Cash 5-1-92		13,784.38
Receipts		
Dues	27,456.00	
Subscriptions	2,745.00	
Back Issue Sales	1,191.70	
Advertising	5,330.50	
Convention and Auction	5,825.00	
Bank interest	1,002.59	
Total		43,550.79
Expenses		
Bandwagon printing	34,644.00	
Bandwagon postage	2,833.00	
Bandwagon mailing prep	832.35	
Misc. Bandwagon expense	200.00	
Misc. printing	105.65	
Membership roster printing	623.28	
Bandwagon mailing envelopes	992.74	
Secretary-Treasurer expenses	390.00	
Convention expenses (Most paid in prior year.)	281.00	
Dues notice printing	781.06	
Bank service charges (foreign exchange)	312.24	
		<u>41,995.32</u>
		1,555.47

Submitted by Dale C. Haynes, Secretary-Treasurer

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**M**ost persons with a serious interest in circus history are aware that the Ringlings, Gollmars and Moellers of Baraboo, Wisconsin were first cousins, their mothers all being Juliar sisters. Likewise there were three Rooney families from Baraboo associated with the circus. They were also first cousins, their fathers Hugh, Mike and John being brothers. Members of the family of a fourth brother, William, did not follow the circus.

Hugh, Mike and John were never circus people nor were any of their ancestors. However, their children, growing up in Baraboo in the 1880's and 1890's, became infected with the circus fever early. Almost without exception, they became either circus performers of note or they held responsible managerial positions on prominent American circuses. The members of these talented families were:

The five children of Hugh (1852-1941) and Bridget (nee Fahey) Rooney (1856-1936) were as follows:

John B. Rooney (1878-1912) became a great principal somersault rider, high school rider and expert on the bounding rope. His wife was Carrie Leon was an accomplished bareback rider.

Minnie Rooney (1886-1978) (Mrs. John Ethridge) was a wire walker and a circus musician and prima donna.

Charles A. Rooney (1889-1936) was a principal somersault and clown rider as well as a high school rider. Minnie Hodgini (1888-1958) was his wife. She was a very accomplished equestrienne from a famous English family of riders.

Edward William Rooney (1893-) began as a rider but later specialized entirely as an aerialist, performing with his wife Jenny.

Elizabeth Rooney (1896-1991) married Carl Romig. She was a principal rider and an aerialist.

The six children of Michael and Elizabeth (nee Connors) Rooney (1852-1910) were as follows:

John J. Rooney (1872-1909) was a bareback rider. His wife was Marie Warner.

Mike Rooney (1875-1916) became an accomplished principal somersault and high school rider.

Elizabeth (Lizzie) Rooney (1877-1957), wife of Dr. Tryon, was a graceful principal bareback rider.

## THOSE OTHER COUSINS FROM BARABOO THE ROONEY FAMILIES

By John Daniel Draper

Henry Rooney (1881-1934)-non professional.

William Rooney-circus performer.

Kate Rooney (Mrs. John O'Keefe)-non professional.

The four children of John (ca. 1854-1931) and Mary Ann Rooney were as follows:

Charles Rooney (1874-1934) was a boss hostler and circus superintendent. His wife was Carrie Bair.

John Rooney (1876-1903) was an eight horse teamster.

Frank Rooney (1886-1950) was a circus superintendent.

Arthur Rooney (1892-1927) was a menagerie manager.

### John B. Rooney

John became a prominent principal bareback somersault rider as well as a high school rider, a performer on the bounding rope and a general acrobat. He had a long tenure on Ringling Bros. Circus.

John B. Rooney and his wife Carrie were featured in this 1906 Barnum & Bailey lithograph. Circus World Museum collection.



cus, dating from 1889 until 1912, with interludes on Barnum & Bailey (1904 through 1907), John Robinson's in 1908, Sells-Floto in 1909 and Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. in 1910 and 1911. For short periods he was also with Rhoda Royal Circus (1910) and the Royal & Adams Circus (1911). His career was cut short by a tragic accident in Chicago at the season's end in 1912. He died on November 7th of injuries suffered when struck by a street car. He had come to be known as "Smiling John," his universal

good nature having endeared him to hundreds of circus people.

John's wife, the former Carrie Goldsmith of the Habana Leon Sisters act, was also a principal rider of note. They were married in 1902 and as early as 1903 she was appearing with her husband as an equestrienne. After 1912 she was head of the Fanchon Sisters wire act. John and Carrie Rooney had one son Hugh, who did not follow a circus career.

Master John Rooney started his circus career as a pony groom at age eleven. When he left home on his great life adventure, the Baraboo Republic of May 8, 1889 had this to say: "Johnny Rooney, acrobat, youngest of two Rooney boys [the other was his cousin Michael] with Ringling Bros. and Van Amburgh's Show, is an attractive card. The little fellow is observed by all with admiration for his gentlemanly deportment and politeness. Johnny is perfectly formed and looks fine in his close fitting tights when performing his part in the ring. He is a dandy little actor."

A remarkably bright chap, by the age of 14 he had developed into a graceful and enthusiastic performer as he rode and drove his twenty beautiful Shetland ponies on the hippodrome track in the children's circus. Very appropriately wearing the green, he was also an expert Roman chariot driver with his four little ponies in a race in competition with the young Francis Reed.

Mike Rooney, three years older, also began his career on Ringling Bros. in 1889. He soon became an expert principal bareback somersault rider and was a mentor of sorts for this young Irish lad. They continued to be together on the show for most of the time until 1904 when John went over to Barnum & Bailey.

When 16 years old, in an



exhibition of rope dancing, Johnnie was billed as the youngest performer of this specialty in the world. Three years later he was doing balancing, somersaulting and acrobatics on the high tight rope. In 1902 this presentation was known as terpsichorean movements, lofty somersaults and high vaulting on the tight rope. In that year with Francis Reed he was also in a grand parlor brother act which featured double posturing concluding with inverted equipose.

Meanwhile in 1896 in ring No. 1 John Rooney rode a principal bareback act as grace personified. In the other two rings were Mike, who rode a bareback whirlwind principal somersault act, and William De Hott, who was described as the "Adonis of All Riders."

Edward Rooney, a younger brother, later remembered that "my brother John was a lot like a father to my brothers, sisters and me. He was much older than the rest of us. He became an acrobat, tight wire performer and bareback rider.

"From the time we were little kids, John would practice us a couple of hours every night in the winter on a felt pad in the front room of the house. We'd do round-offs, flip flaps and got so we could tumble pretty good. Then we'd practice wire and afterwards riding in the ring barn that John had built.

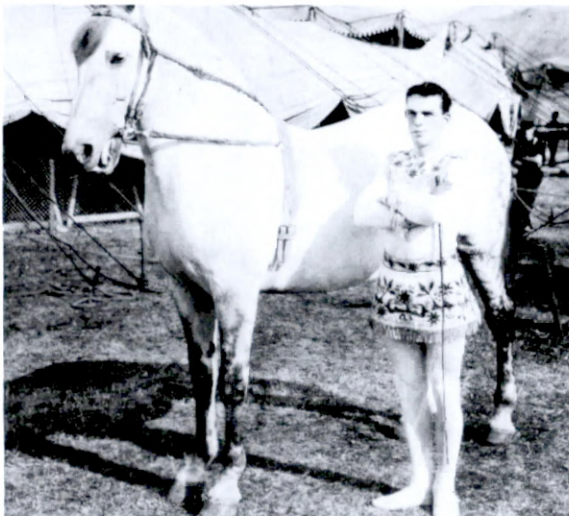
"It was in this atmosphere of high excitement of somersaults and cartwheels, of jump-ups to the back of a running horse and all of the preparations for the start of a circus season that we children were born and grew up. Our mother never objected when her three sons and two daughters all decided to become circus performers."

When just 20 years of age John B. Rooney was billed as the "dashing, intrepid and undefeated bareback champion rider of Europe," excelled by none in fear defying examples of equestrianism. Appearing as his fellow principal riders were William DeMott, "peerless and unchallenged in intricate somersaulting, pirouetting and leaping" and Mike Rooney with his "great display of novel features." In addition John was still appearing on the high tight rope and also riding manege on the Arabian horse Sultan, teamed with his cousin on Mizpah and with Minnie Fisher on Capt. Kidd. He was also one of a number of leapers over horses, camels and elephants.

The next year, for the second season, John and Mike Rooney were appearing in the same act as the greatest equestrian duo with running leaps from the ground to the back of the horse and marvelous somersaulting and mounting. John was

now also performing on the bounding rope. At that time Johnny was paid \$40 per week while Mike was getting \$50. Some other wages were \$7 for John Agee, \$10 for Olga Reed and \$15 for the famous clown, Jules Turnour. That same year, 1899, Lizzie Rooney, Mike's sister, was in her fifth season on Ringling Bros. Circus and was presented as the "petite and finished terpsichorean artiste in principal equestrian feats." For her efforts she was receiving \$35 per week.

In 1900 John Rooney rode his champion bareback act opposite William De Van and Cecil Lowande. The following year



John B. Rooney around 1908. Pfening Archives.

he was in a combination act with De Van. The other two rings were occupied by the principal riders, Frank Hiller and Amelia Feeley. The three principal somersault and trick riders for 1902 were Albert Davenport, Mike Rooney and John Rooney. That year was the last one in which John also did his still vaulting act on the tight rope.

By 1903 John Rooney had perfected his horse to horse backward somersault from the first to the second of two horses running in the ring in tandem. Both he and Mike were regularly doing this feat in ring No. 1 and ring No. 3 while Dallie Julian Ledgett was doing her principal somersault act in the center ring. In the 1903 program she was billed as the one and only lady somersault rider. There were double jockey acts in the three rings: John Rooney and Fred Ledgett in ring No. 1, the Hobsons in the center ring and May Davenport and Reno McCree in ring No. 3.

John Rooney, along with Etta Jordan, was also a featured manege rider. That year some weekly wages were: John Rooney, \$60; Mike Rooney, \$50; John's wife Carrie Rooney, \$10; John Agee, \$16;

clown Jules Turnour \$20; bandleader George Ganweiler, \$40.

At the end of the 1903 season John and Carrie visited his parents in Baraboo before returning to Chicago and joining Ed Shipp's winter circus which opened the following January at Petersburg, Illinois. Shipp and his wife Julia Lowande were veteran performers on Ringling Bros. Circus. At Petersburg, John and Carrie, in a double act, performed with a grace and skill that defied competition and John's backward somersault from horse to horse was the talk of the town.

After the Petersburg engagement, the Rooneys went to New York to join Barnum & Bailey at Madison Square Garden. John went there holding "the foremost position of all American equestrians, without equal in grace or skill as a bareback rider." He rode his principal bareback act, somersaulting from horse to horse as they ran in tandem while Wilkes Lloyd did a champion jockey bareback act in the center ring and William Wallett did a principal act in the other end ring as he executed backward and forward somersaults.

In his second presentation John appeared with Carrie in an exquisite double bareback jockey act where they both did jump-ups from the ground to the back of the swiftly moving horse. John also did backward jump-ups.

On the road with Barnum & Bailey in 1904, the identical single principal acts were presented as at the Garden. However, John and Carrie's second display was combined with that of two other riders, Fred Ledgett and his wife, Dallie Julian, to produce a quartette of somersaulting artists in modern arenic bareback horsemanship. By this time Carrie was developing as a rare combination of aerial artiste and horsewoman who was a veritable queen of the saddle.

For the 1905 season at Madison Square Garden John broke two horses to run in tandem, the second one pulling a Brewster roadster. He would do a somersault from the back of the first horse to that of the second one, then a somersault from that horse to the cart, then a somersault from the cart back to the horse and finally a somersault from the horse down to the ground. That trick was never duplicated. The fine looking horses were trapped in white buff harness. John's attire was a white serge suit and Carrie wore a long white dress. This cart and riding idea was developed into "an act classical" by the Rooneys.

About the same time or just earlier, John started to use the word "riding" for billing his act. He always claimed that he



was the first to use this term in describing a featured equestrian performance. At first the Riding Rooneys referred only to John and Carrie, but later it also included his brother Charles. After John's death, Charles Rooney used the term to refer to all of his riding acts which at times included as many as five members, but never the cart.

In 1905 Rose Wentworth also presented a cart act in the center ring while Herbert Cooke in ring No. 3 had an eccentric combination of ingenious complexity involving riding, driving and juggling.

In a second appearance for the Rooneys, there was a quadruple jockey display of posing and balancing involving Dallie Julian, Carrie Rooney, John Rooney and Fred Ledgett.

On the road that summer the quadruple jockey display included Ella Bradna, the Rooneys and Wilkes Lloyd. In this act there were giant vaults from the ground to the backs of speeding animals as riders alighted gracefully and adroitly on one foot.

In still another display the Rooney's double tandem English trap act was joined in the center ring by the seven member Brunleccusson Troupe on the Tally-Ho on the way to the races and in the opposite end ring by the Wentworth-Derrick Trio-Austrian cart act.

The two double principal bareback acts for 1906 on Barnum & Bailey were done by Charles Siegrist and William Melrose in one end ring and by William De Mott and John Rooney in the other. In ring No. 2 Dallie Julian and Fred Ledgett presented an act entitled "Affectionate Couple in the Park."

Later in the program adroit equestrianism including jump-ups and skillful riding was done by two quartettes of riders--Ella Bradna and Ouika Meers, Fred Derrick and William Melrose in one ring and Dallie Julian and Carrie Rooney, John Rooney and Fred Ledgett in the other. In the center ring the Rowlands rode as a Tally-Ho coaching party.

There is no record of the Riding Rooneys' appearing in Madison Square Garden the next season. On the road Carrie was billed as Ireland's representative in principal bareback riding and equine posturing. The other offerings were the daintiness and daring riding of Dallie Julian and the double bareback act of Marie and Ouika Meers.

Two additional displays were presented in 1907. In one of these there were two double principal bareback somersault acts by Fred Derrick and Johnny Rooney and Charles Siegrist and William Melrose. Josie De Mott in the center ring was named the only somersault equestrienne in the world. This same billing had been used for Dallie Julian on Ringling Brothers in 1903. The other display consisted of three rings of expert riders: Ring No. 1-Ella Bradna and Fred Derrick; ring No. 2-quartette of riding champions W. F. Melrose, Ouika Meers and the Rooneys; ring

would have become had the renowned John Rooney, who was the arch and pivot key, been spared a few years longer."

### Michael Rooney

Of all the Rooney riders, Michael was the first to achieve national acclaim. As early as 1890 an ad in the *New York Clipper* proclaimed Mike Rooney to be the champion boy rider of the universe and the only fifteen year old boy doing a principal somersault act in America.

Mike's career included twelve seasons on Ringling Bros. Circus (1889 through 1896, 1898, 1899, 1902, 1903). He was also on Barnum & Bailey in 1897 and on Great Wallace Shows in 1901.

From his early days on Ringling Bros., in addition to his whirlwind somersault riding, Mike did all of the various types of equestrian acts then presented: single bounding jockey, four horse act, Roman standing race, liberty horses and manege. In 1894 his principal riding act was opposite that of the immortal Charles Fish. It included back and front somersaults, extraordinary leaping and statuesque posing. When just twenty years of age he was called "Ireland's greatest somersault throwing horseman." One of his presentations in 1898 and 1899 with his cousin John was cited as the "most perfect, refined and fascinating double jockey act ever performed" and in mounting he introduced new and novel running leaps from the ground to the back of the horse as well as marvelous somersaults.

In 1903 on Ringling Bros. he was regularly doing the backward somersault from the first to the second horse running in tandem in the ring. At that time cousin John was doing a similar feat in the other end ring. This fact was quite remarkable since only one year before the horse to horse somersault had been done for the first time in public in America, reputedly by Oscar Lowande on Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. One can only wonder how, when and from whom these two young men from Baraboo had learned so early to do this difficult trick on a regular basis.

The same year also brought difficulties for Mike. By midsummer he had been suffering for several weeks from an unspecified affliction of the eyes. The show was in Canada that season and he stayed behind to have a surgical operation at



Mike Rooney, along with Cecil Lowande and Charles W. Fish, were featured in this 1895 Ringling Bros. poster. Pfening Archives.

No. 3-Dallie Julian and Fred Ledgett with their stunning high wheeled vehicle presentation.

For the five final seasons of his career (1908-1912), John Rooney continued his superb principal bareback riding with backward, forward and twisting somersaults and the handsome and excellent cart and three horse tandem riding act in which Carrie participated. She also continued to ride her principal act. On Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. in 1910, for instance, in her short crimson riding skirt, she shared the single lady riding acts with Mamie Lowande and Marie Meers in a novel assortment of leaps, jumps, mounts and dismounts.

For three seasons, 1910-1912, John's brother Charles was a part of the Riding Rooney combination which employed the cart. For their efforts as principal and combination riders the three Rooneys, John, Carrie, and Charles, received a total of \$175.00 per week.

In final tribute, as someone has said, "There is no way of computing what this wonderful piece of circus ring evolution



Kingston, Ontario. When he returned to the circus at Detroit he was apparently much improved and he took up his riding again.

The next year he filled fair dates such as the Big White Fair in Darlington, Wisconsin. In 1900 he appeared in his home town in front of the grandstand at the Sauk County Fair doing his principal somersault act.

After 1903, Mike appeared only on smaller circuses. In 1905 on Sells & Downs he did a principal somersault act and rode a double jockey act with a Miss Doud. The next year he performed on both Mackay's European Circus and on Cole Bros. Circus. On the latter show he shared billing with the famous Linda Jeal, then near the end of her career. For 1908 he was doing his horse to horse somersault on Cole Bros. Circus. Other equestrian offerings on that show were the principal act of William Rolland, the bounding jockey riding of Fred Castello and the hurricane hurdles of William Du-Crow. In the spring of 1909 Mike Rooney was busy with Joe Berris at the Cole Bros. quarters of Martin J. Downs in Harbor Creek, Pennsylvania getting different horses and riders in condition for an early start.

Soon after that it was reported in the Baraboo papers that because of illness he had been forced to leave the show and to remain at his home in Harbor Creek. There he had attempted suicide, severing his windpipe but missing his jugular vein. This account went on to say that he was found by his father-in-law and was rushed to a hospital in Erie, Pennsylvania. His wife, with the show, had been notified, and that he was expected to recover.

By mid-summer he joined the Dode Fisk Circus as a principal and somersault rider. He also rode manege and presented a pony act. Blanche Reed was the principal equestrienne that year. In 1910 Mike Rooney continued on Dode Fisk as a rider, with the additional responsibilities of equestrian director. He was soon being highly complimented for having things running smoothly among the performers.

Minnie Hodgini, the prominent principal equestrienne, recorded in her diary that she was on the show that year, except for an interlude from August to October, when she performed on the fair circuit with her cousin, Madame Bedini. Minnie must have been a good friend of Mike since a record of some of his earnings was found in her 1910 diary and there is some indication that she may have ridden with him in a bareback act. She was a native of Birmingham, England and this diary is the earliest evidence of her being in America. Interestingly, six years later she

married Mike's cousin, the somersault rider Charles Rooney.

At the close of the 1910 season at Brenham, Texas on December 14th, the Dode Fisk show was sold to Jerry Mugivan and it became the Great Sanger Combined Shows.

In 1911, Mike started out on the Sanger show when it opened at Brenham on April 1. He was then billed as England's champion bareback rider. Prior to the opening date he had been busy superintending the breaking of stock and animals as well as directing rehearsals. No other information has been found about Mike during the season except one brief entry in Minnie Hodgini's diary which stated that Mike left the show at Weldon, Arkansas on April 24th.

From this time onward the career of Michael Rooney becomes obscure. The only other information that been found is that he was a horse trainer in Chicago for some years prior to his death there from pneumonia on February 9, 1916.

#### John J. Rooney

John J. Rooney, not to be confused with his cousin John B. Rooney, was a brother of Mike Rooney and Lizzie Rooney and the son of Michael Rooney, Sr. and Elizabeth Connors Rooney. His mother, who died the year following his death, was born in 1852 on shipboard between Ireland and America. On arrival in the United States her parents settled in St. Louis, her home until she moved to Baraboo in 1883. John was then eleven years old.

The earliest reference to John J. Rooney's circus career is found in the 1897 Ringling Bros. route book where both John J. and John B. Rooney were listed. However, no mention of what he did that year is indicated. His career has been pieced together from various newspaper ads, heralds, programs, route books and the New York *Clipper*. It included four years on Gollmar Bros. Circus (1898-1900, 1902), one year on Campbell Bros. Circus (1901) and three full seasons on the Frank A. Robbins Circus (1905-1907) and the very beginning of the 1908 season.

In 1902 he married Marie Wagner of Baraboo but it is reported that they never lived together.

During the 1908 season John was suffering from tuberculosis. In search of some relief, he spent three quarters of a

year in Denver, Colorado followed by some months in Phoenix, Arizona. He returned to his home in Baraboo just three weeks before his death on July 24, 1909.

Although eclipsed in prominence as a performer by both his cousin John and his brother Mike, he became a very substantial principal somersault rider and near the end of his career he was listed as doing the horse to horse somersault. As early as 1899 he was an accomplished somersault rider on one horse. By 1900 he did this act opposite Willis Gollmar. He was also a jockey rider. The next spring at the Campbell Bros. quarters in Fairbury, Nebraska, John Rooney and Willie Atkins were occupying the training ring most of the time and were doing some fine riding. Later that season while on the road with the show he did some great principal riding opposite Alex Lowande.

John J. Rooney. Circus World Museum collection.



Back on Gollmar Bros. Circus in 1902, John Rooney appeared with John Willis as a principal somersault and jockey rider. They also trained horses and ponies, did four horse acts and rode the cake walking horses "Kid" and "Sultan." Beginning in 1905 and continuing until mid-season 1908 John Rooney was on the Frank A. Robbins Circus, his longest tenure on any show. During this period as a principal bareback and somersault rider, he regularly performed in the ring opposite Josie Ashton, the well known principal equestrienne.

It was tragic that his life was snuffed out at the early age of thirty-seven. Among his survivors were his more famous sister and brother, Lizzie and Mike. Little is recorded about another brother, William, who performed on Sells & Gray's Circus in 1900.

#### Elizabeth "Lizzie" Rooney

Born in 1877, Lizzie had a riding career in the circus that extended over sixteen seasons: Ringling Bros. (1896-1901), Walter L. Main (1902), Campbell Bros. (1903), Gollmar Bros. (1904, 1906-1908), Great Floto Shows (1905), Cole Bros. (1909), and Sells-Floto (1911). In addition there are heralds for the 1905 season for both Gollmar Bros. and Barnum & Bailey that carry her name.

William De Van, who became Lizzie's





Elizabeth "Lizzie" Rooney. Pfening Archives.

husband in 1901, was a noted bounding jockey and bareback somersault rider. He rode in a fast hurdle act and in the two horse Roman standing races. He was also a champion leaper. De Van was on Ringling Bros. during most of the years from 1889 through 1901. In 1902 he was on Walter L. Main, on Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. in 1903, on Gollmar Bros. in 1904 and on the Great Floto Shows in 1905. Soon after that he met his death while performing the leaps.

Later, on Gollmar Bros. Circus, Lizzie met and eventually married Frederick E. Tryon, a young ticket seller who was also a horn player in the band. Tryon attended medical school during the winter months and upon graduation he became the circus physician. In 1912 as doctor, press agent and mail agent on Gollmar Bros. he received wages of \$18 per week. After his circus career, he settled in the Baraboo area and practiced medicine there for some forty years. When he died in 1954 at age seven-seven, he was the beloved dean of Baraboo physicians. Lizzie survived her husband by three years. She retired from circus riding in 1911.

From her earliest billing on Ringling Bros., when her brother Mike served as the ringmaster for her act, Lizzie Rooney was described as a "peerless star." Later she was called a petite and finished terpsichorean artiste. In 1898 she appeared with Rose Dockrill and Elena Ryland in principal equestrian feats. At the turn of the century equestriennes such as Lizzie wore a fairly standard costume of silk tights, full tarlatan skirt, satin bodice cut low with flowers and pumps made of cotton tied with ribbons. These women had nerves of iron, were solicitous for the

comfort and welfare of their neighbors and worked in a very business-like manner. However, they were quite often superstitious. For instance, the madcap rider Sadie Conners, would regularly predict with a deck of cards what luck her numerous friends could expect with their various mounts on a particular afternoon.

A 1905 courier described Lizzie as a "champion bareback equestrienne with uncommon skill and great arenic accomplishments, the greatest and most perfect example of female riding seen anywhere." Undeniably she possessed grace, fearlessness and dash. Her every feat was a surprise and her entire act was one of astounding perfection.

### Charles Rooney

During most of his career, Charles Rooney, the son of John and Mary Ann Rooney, was a boss hostler and superintendent of stock successively on Ringling Bros., John Robinson and Hagenbeck-Wallace circuses. He began his career as a groom and teamster in 1892. There is a reference to his serving on Gollmar Bros. around 1895-96 as superintendent of live stock. Eventually he went back to Ringling Bros. as a teamster in the baggage horse department and in 1900 he had graduated to an eight horse driver.

Early in 1901 he married Carrie Bair of Baraboo. From this marriage there were four children, Gerald, Marabeth, Esther and Muriel.

By 1903 Charles was assistant superintendent of baggage stock, serving on the staff of boss hostler Spencer Alexander who was known as "Delavan." Following Alexander's death in 1911, Charles succeeded him as superintendent of stock and boss hostler. In this position he was in charge of all horses and teamsters and was responsible for getting the show on and off the lot under any possible condition of weather. At this job he had no superior.

Soft soil and stormy weather were the test. The hostler, on horseback, directed the wagons to where they were spotted. Tractors, if used, usually dropped the wagons on solid pavement and the teams took over on the soft ground. The degree of sand, marshy ground and mud indicated the number of hook rope teams needed to pull and elephants to push in order to move a heavy wagon. In addition to the regular 8 horse team, a heavy baggage wagon or pole wagon might require several hook rope teams.

If it had rained extensively during the day while the show was on the lot, the empty wagons might be moved to solid paving and the contents carried to them. Sometimes many hours, even all night, might be required to move the scores of wagons to the railroad crossing where they could be loaded. In dire cases the undergear was jerked right out from under a wagon and the body or box would drop directly into the mire. Through all this type of turmoil, the boss hostler had to keep his horses in good condition and retain the respect of all of the teamsters.

Percheron horses, a breed that came originally from France, were deemed best suited for use as circus baggage stock. Averaging just over three quarters ton in weight, the Percheron was usually gray or dapple gray as well as black or white. Two, four, six and eight horse teams were used for moving the heavy wagons from the runs to the lot and vice versa. In the street parades, under unusual circumstances, and for purposes of display and grandeur, a twelve, sixteen, twenty or even forty horse hitch might be employed. During the time that Charlie Rooney was on Ringling Bros., there were probably more than a dozen eight horse teams, two dozen six horse teams and more than a dozen each of four and two horse teams.

At times Charlie could be quite abrupt but he was always fair in his dealings with others. Although he was a dynamic personality under pressure and expected everyone to cooperate fully and immediately, in more relaxed moments he could be quite the jolly Irishman. He never wore a coat but he always had on his vest. He was colorful, reliable and his word was his bond.

Charlie Rooney, boss hostler of Hagenbeck-Wallace, in 1933. Pfening Archives.





When the combined show opened in 1919, Tom Lynch, the boss hostler of Barnum & Bailey who had been there since 1900, was made boss hostler of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. Due to less seniority, Charles Rooney left to join Mugivan and Bowers at Peru, Indiana as stock buyer. He also became superintendent of stock on John Robinson, the position he held through 1924. From 1925 until early 1934 he was boss hostler on Hagenbeck-Wallace. In 1933 he earned \$54 a week for his duties.

Charles Rooney literally died in the harness. In January of 1934 in Peru he dropped over dead of a ruptured artery while conversing on the street with a friend. His son Gerald, also known as "Buster," held various positions on circuses in the decade of 1930-40.

As a permanent tribute to Charlie Rooney, a photo exists of a sixty six horse hitch on the Hagenbeck-Wallace lot at Utica, New York, taken on June 3, 1932. In the forefront Rooney is seated on his spotted horse. Behind him is a group of baggage stock made up of four eight horse teams, five six horse teams and one four horse team, all hitched to one baggage wagon.

#### John "Jack" Rooney

John Rooney, also known as Jack, became an eight horse teamster on the Luel-la Forepaugh-Fish Wild West. Early in August 1903 he was hit and killed by a Northwestern Railroad engine near a dangerous five point crossing at Janesville, Wisconsin. The accident occurred during a blinding rainstorm.

At the time of the accident the show was in bad financial condition. It had just been bought at a receiver's sale by the Erie Lithograph Company which in turn leased it to John A. Barton. It was scheduled to reopen soon in Appleton, Wisconsin. The show finally reached Ishpeming, Michigan where it collapsed completely. All the animals, including 130 head of horses and 26 railroad cars, were bought by the Sells & Downs Circus.

#### Arthur Rooney

By 1912, Arthur Rooney was working in the menagerie department of Ringling Bros. Circus. In 1926 he was superintendent of menagerie animals with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. He died in Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1927 at the age thirty-five.

#### Frank Rooney

Frank Rooney became a circus baggage stock hostler. In 1916 he was assistant boss hostler on Wheeler Bros. Circus. Graduating from long string driver, Frank became superintendent of stock and boss hostler on Al G. Barnes in 1921. He continued on that show through at least 1928 when he served as general superintendent. In 1925 he had charge of the show's ranch at Barnes City, California. In both that and the following year, Frank Rooney, in a sensational equestrian display, drove up to 160 head of baggage stock around the hippodrome track during the big top show. On some of those days there was probably so much dust stirred up that the audience could scarcely see anything else.



Elizabeth Rooney Romig, Minnie Hodgini Rooney and Charles A. Rooney. Circus World Museum collection.

His wife Nettie was a performer on the show from 1922 until 1925, sometimes as a manege rider. She sold tickets during the 1926 and 1927 seasons.

In 1934 Frank Rooney, in retirement, was operating a chicken ranch.

#### Minnie Rooney Ethridge

Minnie Rooney Ethridge was the daughter of Hugh and Bridget Rooney and the sister of John B. Rooney. She is not to be confused with the equestrienne, Minnie Hodgini Rooney, the wife of her brother, Charles A. Rooney. As a circus performer she was mainly a musician, prima donna and wire walker. In the parade on Ringling Bros. for 1916 and 1917 she played the electric unafon mounted on the Egypt Tableau. In the latter year this wagon was drawn by a sixteen camel hitch.

In the early 1920's Minnie Rooney appeared with John Robinson (1921 and 1922), with Sells-Floto (1923) and with Sparks (1924 and 1925). In a terpsichorean offering she performed on the wire and as an aerialist she was on the swinging lad-

ders. In 1929 she worked on the slack wire with the Vanderburg Bros. show put out by Frank E. Hall of Whitewater, Wisconsin. In 1930 she appeared with the Walter L. Main Circus as an aerialist and was with the Charles Rooney & Co. vaudeville act in the midwest. There she was a wire walking phenomenon with sensational feats gracefully executed on the single steel strand featuring a series of modern dances. The next year she was engaged by Miller Bros. 101 Ranch Wild West.

Minnie had a son, William Svendsen, from her first marriage. Her second husband was John Ethridge.

#### Elizabeth Rooney Romig

Elizabeth Romig was the daughter of Hugh and Bridget Rooney and the sister of John B. Rooney. She became a dainty and experienced principal bareback rider, a graceful tight wire walker, an aerialist on the swinging ladders and cloud swing, and an animal trainer. In 1920 she was one of the riders in the six member comedy riding act of Cecil Lowande. In 1927 she rode a principal act opposite Erma Rudynoff and was also a manege rider.

With her husband, Carl Romig, she presented the football pony and trick horses. They also did the riding mechanic or "how riders are made" act, which introduced bareback riding, amid much laughter, to the children from the audience.

The Romig-Rooney riding act in 1943 consisted of Carl, Elizabeth and the children, Fay and Irvin and Gracie Sykes. The family riding act continued until the end of the 1948 season when all their horses were sold to Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. In the later years the riders, in addition to Elizabeth, were Fay Romig as well as Alice Webb and George Free with clowning by Irvin.

Carl Romig, whom she married in 1917, was a wild west and rough riding cowboy with specialties in fancy roping and the big loop catch. In the main show he was a high school rider, trainer of liberty horses, trick horses and military ponies and an equestrian director.

Irvin and Fay Romig were on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 1949 through 1951. In 1949 Irvin clowning and was in the Bostock riding act. For the next two years, Irvin and Fay headed the six member Romig bareback riding troupe. That same year Irvin had a trained donkey act and a performing American buffalo.



The Romigs' adopted daughter, Gracie Sykes, grew up in the circus with her parents. As early as 1935 on Russell Bros. she worked on swinging ladders and the single trapeze, assisting Carl with the trick horses, and performed clown acrobatics and riding manege with Frank Miller's dancing horses. Gracie is now Grace McIntosh, owner of the M & M Circus.

After the break up of the family acts in 1948, Gracie did aerial work on a number of shows: John Pawling Great London Circus (1949), Biller Bros. (1950), Al G. Kelly & Miller Bros. (1952-1954, 1956, 1957). Upon the death of Orrin Davenport, Dorothy Davenport and Grace McIntosh were the co-producers of the Orrin Davenport circus.

Irvin Romig did a clown acrobatic act in 1935 and worked with bucking mules. In 1947 he was a producing clown and the next year he provided the comedy in the Romig-Rooney act, riding as "Ernie Skervie." In the decade of the 1950's he appeared in a number of Shrine circuses and developed the character of "Ricky" the clown for which he became quite well known in the Detroit area. He also produced his own children's television show for eleven years from 1953 to 1964. In the middle 1950's he was joined in clowning by his father, who was a producing clown as late as 1969.

Fay became Mrs. Fay Snyder. She moved to California and, as a trainer, furnished animals for movies and television. From her early career with her parents, she was a versatile performer doing swinging ladders, manege, bareback riding, trained dogs, high school mules, comedy mule, contortion and comedy acrobatics. Her animal actors have included dogs, manege horses, miniature horses, donkeys, ponies, and a llama. She was also adept at rope spinning. Some of the shows with which she appeared were: De Wayne Bros. Circus (1972), Paul Kaye's Circus in Hawaii (1975), Lion Country Safari Circus (1976), Emmett Kelly, Jr. Circus (1977), CBS TV Show (1977), Denver Police Circus (1979), Dobritch International (1979), Funs-A-Poppin Circus (1982), Vargas (1986), Eagle Country Circus (1987) and July 4th celebrations in the Rose Bowl (1982, 1987).

### Edward William Rooney

Edward Rooney, a son of Hugh & Bridget Rooney, was born on a farm near Baraboo. His father was a teamster and lumberman. Ed grew up in the excitement of somersaults and cart wheels and of jump-ups to the back of a running horse. His eldest brother, John B. Rooney, taught his sisters and brothers, including Eddie, the fundamentals of acrobatics. Eddie, in his teens, did the bounding wire act on Goll-



Edward and Jenny Rooney on Ringling Bros. around 1918. Pfening Archives.

mar Bros. Circus as well as jockey and Roman riding, the hurdle mule act and served as ringmaster for the riding acts. He was paid \$12 a week by the show and he made an extra \$6 around the dressing room lugging water and washing tights for other performers. He regularly sent this money home.

In 1910, his last year on Gollmar Bros., he was doing aerial foot revolutions and performing as an aerial gymnast as well as riding a high school act and participating in the hippodrome races. Although through 1918 he performed different equestrian acts such as Roman riding, presenting trained horses and riding high school horses, his main interest turned to the flying trapeze, the double trapeze and high aerial work. In these endeavors he was joined by his wife Jenny.

Jenny Smith, an orphan, joined the Adam Forepaugh and Sells Bros. Circus in that year. She had worked with her cousin Mayme Ward on the Van Amburg show as early as 1905 and 1906 in trapeze and acrobatic acts with the Hines-Kimball troupe of John and Nettie Hines.

Ed courted Jenny in 1911 on Forepaugh-Sells as they rode side by side on white horses in the daily street parades. "We wore bright yellow velvet suits," Ed remembered, "with silver spangles and big hats with yellow ostrich feather plumes." Near the end of that season they were married at Valdosta, Georgia.

On Forepaugh-Sells that year Ed earned \$20 a week for his single trapeze act, for riding in the hippodrome races,

for ringmastering, and for bare back riding when required.

The next year Ed and Jenny joined forces to produce their own double lofty trapeze act which they presented for many years. For this and other turns in the performance they earned \$40 a week in 1913 and \$45 in 1914. With a great patriotic gesture at the time of World War I, the Ringling management referred to this aerial offering as the "Made in America Act." In addition, Jenny developed the giant cloud swing that was performed as early as 1912 as a free act in the front yard of Ringling Bros. Circus. She soon became known as the "empress of the cloud swing." She also performed a lofty perch-like act with Edward. In an outdoor presentation with her husband, she appeared sixty feet in the air without any safety device or net as she hung by the instep of one foot from a loop of webbing around Ed's neck. In 1917 and in other years, even a decade later, Jenny rode in the now historic fairyland coach as Cinderella. This presentation was originally given in connection with the spec of the same name.

Jenny Rooney was recognized in the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey family as "the beauty of the circus." She stood "as one of the most versatile young performers within the canvas walls; in one breathless evening she could daze you with her somersaults and wrong-side-out-upside-down feats with a single rope as apparatus; she could gallop into the ring upon a snowy charger, pirouette upon a fragile toe and crash through the tissues of a hoop, alighting again in butterfly fashion upon the same charger."

The aerial Rooneys appeared on Ringling Bros. from 1912 through 1918 and on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey from 1919 through 1940. During some winters, such as in January 1925, they played in vaudeville and later at the spring fairs in the South. During the off-seasons in 1938 and 1939 the Rooneys performed at the Medinah Shrine Circus in Chicago. After 1940, Ed and Jenny worked indoors during the winters with Hamid-Morton and with a variety of Shrine shows and during the summers for week long dates outdoors in parks and at fairs.

During his professional career Eddie was always associated with such top flight performers as the Flying Siegrists, Con Colleano of the tight wire and May Wirth, the bareback rider. In fact in 1908 and 1909, at that time still aspiring to be a great bareback rider, he was with Charlie Siegrist's flying act. His brother John had given him the idea that if he "gained balance through dancing on a wire, agility through tumbling and poise through working on the flying trapeze," he could become a proficient rider. Instead, as it



turned out, he became a very successful aerialist.

Their only child, a son John named for his uncle, did not choose a circus career. Rather, he took a degree in dentistry from Marquette University and was with the air force in the South Pacific during World War II.

### Charles A. Rooney and Minnie Hodgini Rooney

Charles Rooney, a younger brother of John B. Rooney, became a highly respected equestrian performer. Beginning his circus career on Gollmar Bros. in 1905, while in his middle teens, he appeared on that show in two intervals for a total of nine years. In 1916 he married Hermine (Minnie) Hodgini who was an accomplished member of a famous English family of riders. Her mother, Heikie, came to America in that year after the death of her husband Edward Hodgini. Minnie's brothers were Edward and Joe Hodgini and there was a sister in America, Hettie McCree, wife of Reno McCree, Jr. Although the Charles A. Rooneys never had any children to continue the art, they "adopted" four of Minnie's nephews and nieces from England, children of Edward and Nellie Hodgini. These were Corinne, Ted, Joe and Caroline Hodges Hodgini. In this country, all of these persons continued in the circus business, including work in standing riding acts.

Minnie and Charlie Rooney. Pfening Archives.

Throughout his riding career, Charles Rooney was usually cast in a clown role at some point in the performance. His first circus experience was riding in a humorous principal act as well as in jockey and Roman standing races. He continued as a hurdle rider and as a manege rider. By 1909 he was presenting a liberty horse act and the next year was a horse trainer and also a parade officer. On Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Circus he presented the foremost liberty horse "Modock," advertised as "trained to perfection with almost a human brain."

In 1911 and 1912 Charlie was with John and Carrie Rooney as one of the Riding Rooneys and rode in the famous somersault equestrian act that featured the English trap drawn by the tandem team.

On the Ringling show in 1912, he and Percy Clarke also rode principal somersault acts in the end rings and John was in the center ring. In addition Charles presented "Orlando, the Fire King," the liberty horse that was ever obedient to his master's call.

On Gollmar Bros. in 1914 and again in 1915 Charles Rooney and Minnie Hodgini, as the Rooney-Hodgini Troupe, were featured principal riders and he was doing the horse to horse somersault. Their salaries at that time were \$55 and \$50 per week, respectively. The next year, Charles and Minnie were joined by his sister Elizabeth and they rode a bareback act as the Three Rooneys. In the fall of 1916 Charles and Minnie were married and the Three Riding Rooneys continued through 1919.

Minnie Rooney, born in Birmingham, England, had gone to Wisconsin to join the Dode Fisk Circus in May of 1910. She was a principal rider for the entire season except for an interlude in August and

September when she worked with Madame Bedini on the state fair circuits. In 1911 and part of 1912 she continued in the same role on the Sanger's Combined Shows, which was the successor to the Dode Fisk Circus. In June of 1911 she married Frank E. Hadley, assistant legal adjuster on the show. He died unexpectedly in St. Louis exactly six months after their marriage.

Minnie joined the Mazeppa and Greater United Shows at Columbus, Ohio on May 4, 1912. In 1913 she rode a high school horse on Hagenbeck-Wallace and in a double bareback act with Olga Reed where she rode with matchless grace, rare skill and ease. At the winter circus that year at the Globe Theater she was the "stellar constellation" among the equestriennes in an exhibition that was both dangerous and entertaining.

During her career with her husband, Minnie always rode in the Riding Rooney act. In addition she did a beautiful and graceful principal act, as on Hagenbeck-Wallace in 1918 opposite the famous Rosa Rosalind. In 1919 on the same show she shared riding honors with Pearl Castello and Ouika Meers. In midseason the Rooneys left the show to return to Baraboo to

break new acts for the upcoming fairs. In her beautiful manege riding, in 1927 on "Indian Love Call," she demonstrated many paces such as the Spanish fandango, cake walk and fox trot.

Minnie Hodgini Rooney on Sparks Circus in 1925. Pfening Archives.



Later she performed with her nieces Corinne and Caroline in an artistic cloud swing act. By the 1930's this group was called the La Venia Sisters. Minnie was the head of this troupe. The repertoire of the various members grew to include swinging ladders, single trapeze with muscle grinds and double trapeze. With her riding dogs and her manege act Minnie was sometimes referred to as Hermine La Venia or Senorita Hermine.

Charles Rooney's Riding Rooney act continued until 1935. From time to time, in addition to Charlie and Minnie, it included: Rooney-Meers (1922), Corinne Hodgini (1926-1934), Mike Schirmer (1923, 1926, 1930), Bernie Griggs (1926), Billy Walleth (1927), Malvin "Rooney" (1928 as clown), Caroline Hodges Hodgini (1930).

The presentation featured somersaulting and leaping on and off of the backs of fast running bareback Arabian horses and single and double feats of equestrianism never seen before. Pyramids were formed, drills were presented and the latest dance steps were shown. Beautiful costumes and splendid horses were employed in presenting great riding which always elicited favorable comment and applause.

In 1929 the Riding Rooney Troupe, one of three companies performing in the Poodles Hanneford style, appeared in the Chicago Stadium Circus combined with Miller Bros. 101 Ranch Real Wild West. The others were the troupes of George Hanneford and of Joe Hodgini. In 1930 the Riding Rooneys staged a circus with the production of Emmerich Kalman's colorful operetta, "The Circus Princess,"





on the stage of the Municipal Theater in St. Louis.

Due to ill health, Charles Rooney retired from circus life in 1935. He continued with his Circus de Paree, a vaudeville unit, and Minnie was also a vaudeville player, but the two were not always together on the same unit. While on tour, Charlie died of a heart attack on December 24, 1936 near Nashville, Tennessee.

Coming from the great circus heritage of Baraboo, Charlie Rooney was always with and for the circus and was the kind of a person you would like to have known. A tribute from Ernest Landers, one time ticket seller and auditor for Gollmar Bros. Circus and later publisher of the *Republican Reporter* of Oregon, Illinois, appears in Robert H. Gollmar's book, *My Father Owned a Circus*: "One of the best and dearest friends in the circus life was Charles Rooney, the great bareback rider who did somersaults. He was a quiet man but all the way a trooper. If the circus was short handed, Charles Rooney drove a six or eight horse team; if they needed help to get the circus set up or taken down, he was very willing to help. To me he was a wonderful man in every sense of the word and a true friend."

"One time he wanted to buy another ring horse and he shopped around until he found just what he wanted. It was on a plow, a great big white horse and would just fit the bill. The owner didn't want to part with it, but Rooney offered so much money that he got the horse and used it to finish his act. There are two kinds of horses in riding acts; the ones which go through the regular routine and then the finish horse, which goes a lot faster."

After Charlie's death, Minnie continued in show business with her dog act, "Minnie Rooney and Her Pets," until three months before her death on December 27, 1958 in Toledo, Ohio.

Minnie Rooney's niece, Corinne Hodges Hodgini, arrived in America from England in 1925. The next year she was on Sparks Circus with her uncle and aunt and rode in the Riding Rooney act. In 1930 she received her final U. S. citizenship papers. She continued with the Riding Rooneys through 1934. She was also doing principal riding and the cloud swing. Sometime near the end of this period she married Bert Dearo Tarrant (1898-1978) of the great aerial contortion act.

She continued in equestrian acts by riding manege in 1935 on Russell Bros. and

she was a member of the Rieffenach Troupe in both 1941 and 1942 on Cole Bros. Circus. She was a bareback rider on Cole Bros. again in 1943 and also in that year she rode on Polack Bros. with the Poodles Hanneford act at Cincinnati, Ohio.

Through at least 1966 she performed in various aerial offerings: cloud swing, single trapeze, swinging ladders, web and aerial ballet. Beginning in 1963 she also did some work with wardrobe.

From 1935 through 1966 she regularly



The Romig-Rooney riding troupe on Jay Gould Circus in 1943. Left to right Carl Romig, Fay Rooney, Gracie Sykes, Elizabeth Rooney and groom. Pfening Archives.

appeared with her husband on a number of Shrine circuses. Included here is a partial list of other shows for which she performed: Lewis Bros. (1932), Russell Bros. (1934, 1935), Cole & Rice (1934), Fred R. Harper Circus Unit (1935), Downie Bros. (1936, 1938, 1939), Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey (1937), St. Louis Police Circus (1940, 1946), Cole Bros. (1941-45), Bailey Bros. (1945), Frank Wirth Circus (1946), Chicago Coliseum International Circus (1947), Warren Bros. (1950) and Gil Gray (1963).

Corinne's sister and brothers arrived in America in 1927. Caroline was then eleven years old, Joe was thirteen and Edward was fifteen. Three years later Caroline was working with the Riding Rooney act. In 1937 she rode with Nellie Schrader, Rose Heller and her two brothers on the Hodgini Riding act with the Seils Sterling Circus.

In the next ten years she presented a variety of aerial offerings: cloud swing, aerial ladder and single trapeze with muscle grinds. With her husband, Robert Hodgson (?-1991) as the Hodgsons she did double trapeze, rope spinning, whip cracking and comedy acrobatics. Later, the Hodgsons had their own shopping center units from which they retired in 1978. In addition to a number of Shrine circuses, a par-

tial list of shows played either by Caroline or by Caroline with her husband were: St. Louis Police Circus (1930, 1934, 1935), Russell Bros. (1934, 1935), Dennie Curtis Fashion Plate (1935), Seils Sterling (1937), King Bros. (1942), Olympia Circus (1943), Barnes Bros. (1944, 1947), and Patterson Bros. (1954).

The two brothers, Edward (1912-1957) and Joe Harry Hodges Hodgini (1913-1946) performed together for a decade in America as the Hodgini Bros., English clowns and comedy acrobats. They were on Lewis & Zimmerman Circus (1929), Lewis Bros. (1932), Cole & Rice (1934), Russell Bros. (1935), and St. Louis Police Circus (1935). They had their Riding Hodgini act on Seils Sterling Circus in 1936 and 1937. In addition to the two brothers, the members of the troupe consisted of Rose Heller, Nellie Schrader and their sister, Caroline. Verna Lindemann also rode for some dates. Joe Hodgini was featured with this group as the world's funniest riding comedian.

During World War II the brothers were in the armed forces of the United States. In 1946 they came back to the circus business, joining Sparks Circus. Joe Hodgini suddenly died just two days after the opening of the season. He had recently been released from the U. S. Navy.

Edward continued on the show for that season as a clown acrobat. During the next ten years he clowning on a number of shows including King Bros. (1947), Kelly-Morris Circus (1950, 1951), Wallace Bros. (1952), Bailey Bros. (1953), Capt. Eddy's Circus (1954), Ring Bros. (1954), Bailey Bros. & Cristiani Circus (1955) and King Bros. Eastern Unit (1956).

In 1956 Edward featured a comedy auto act. He died in the spring of the next year at the young age of 45.

In conclusion, as a circus family the Rooneys were unusual in several ways. All members were first generation circus people. Their presentations were quite professional. Except for the children of the Romigs, no offspring went into the circus business.

Although Charlie and Minnie Rooney had no children of their own, at their personal expense they brought two nieces and two nephews to this country from England. These children were members of a famous equestrian family. Their father was deceased and the mother, although hating to be separated from four of her seven children, realized that they had a better chance to succeed here with their Aunt Minnie and Uncle Charlie than at



home. These children responded well to this encouragement and indeed did do honor to their chosen profession and to their family heritage.

TABLE I

Partial list of circuses on which the Romigs appeared:

(Until 1931 chiefly Elizabeth & Carl; 1934-1948-Romig family including the children; after 1949 Elizabeth & Carl worked their small acts only locally)

1916 Gollmar Bros. Circus (Elizabeth)  
1917 John Robinson's Circus; Gollmar Bros. & Jas. Patterson Circus  
1918 Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus (Elizabeth while Carl was in army)  
1919 Fairs with Rooney-Hodgini act (Elizabeth); Walter L. Main Circus (Carl)  
1920 John Robinson's Circus  
1921 Walter L. Main Circus; John Robinson's Circus  
1922 Kretz Bros. Circus; also had riding stable  
1923 Fairs (Carl)  
1924 Barbour's Wonderland Circus  
1927 John Robinson's Circus  
1928 Fairs  
1930 St. Louis Police Circus  
1931 Columbus Auditorium Circus  
1934 Barnard Bros. Circus  
1935 Russell Bros. Circus  
1936 James M. Cole Circus; Kay Bros. Circus

1937 St. Louis Police Circus  
1939 Walter L. Main Circus  
1943 Garden Bros. Circus; Jay Gould Circus  
1944 Wallace Bros. Circus  
1945 M. L. Clark & Sons Circus  
1947 Romig-Rooney Circus  
1948 Dales Bros. Circus; Al G. Kelly & Miller Bros. Circus

TABLE II

Partial list of shows on which Charlie and Minnie Rooney appeared. (Starting with 1914, they appeared on the same show.)

1905-08 Gollmar Bros. (Charlie)  
1909 Gollmar Bros.; Rhoda Royal Circus (Charlie)  
1910 Gollmar Bros. (Charlie), Dode Fisk (Minnie)  
1911 Forepaugh & Sells (Charlie), Royal & Adams (Charlie), Sanger's Circus (Minnie)  
1912 Ringling Bros. (Charlie), Sanger's Circus; Mazeppa & Greater United Show (Minnie)  
1913 Ringling Bros. (Charlie), Hagenbeck-Wallace (Minnie)  
1914-16 Gollmar Bros. Circus  
1917 Patterson & Gollmar Bros.; John Robinson's  
1918 Hagenbeck-Wallace  
1919 Hagenbeck-Wallace; Convey & Smith American Legion Hippodrome; Miles Theater (Detroit)

1920 Sells-Floto  
1921-22 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey  
1923 Bantly Bros. Circus  
1924 La Pearl's Circus  
1924-25 New York Hippodrome (winter)  
1925-26 Sparks Circus  
1927 Frank McIntyre Grotto Circus; Minneapolis Shrine; Wirth & Hamid  
1928 Toronto Exposition; Odd Fellow Bazaar (Providence, Rhode Island); Dates-May-East St. Louis, Illinois, July-Rockaway Park, New York, July & August-Gouverneur, New York, September-Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania  
1929 Lewis & Zimmerman Circus; Chicago Stadium Circus with Miller Bros. 101 Real Wild West, circus movie in Hollywood at Paramount Famous Lasky Corp.; Richmond Shrine Circus 1930 St. Louis Police Circus; Riding Rooneys All Star Attraction (circus unit); St. Louis Municipal Opera; Los Angeles Shrine (1st); Madison, Wisconsin Shrine  
1931 Mack Hale Bros.; Indoor Circus-Knights of Columbus Circus at St. Louis, Mo., Dayton, Ohio, Evansville, Indiana  
1932 Lewis Bros. Circus  
1934 Russell Bros. Circus; Cole & Rice All American Circus; Barnard Bros. Circus; Omaha Shrine (Morton); Buffalo, New York Shrine  
1935 St. Louis Police Circus; Rooney Bros. Circus 1936 Vaudeville units

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**A** seemingly never ending number of small and medium sized truck circuses emerged during the mid 1930s. After three meager seasons during the first years of the Great Depression, business in the industry picked up in 1933, leading many former circus owners plus a goodly number of "first of May owners" to get into the business. Some of these new shows lasted only a matter of weeks. Such was the case of the Curtis-Gregg Circus which took to the road in late April 1934 and was finished off in five weeks.

The new circus was organized in the early weeks of the year by Dennie Curtis and Fred O. (Fearless) Gregg in Curtis' home town of Westmont, Illinois. It was framed to be a medium sized motorized show which was routed in several states around Chicago.

Dennis L. Curtis was born November 29, 1885 in Great Bend, Kansas. He joined Ringling Bros. at Baraboo, Wisconsin while still a boy, working first as a pony boy, later becoming a horse trainer, and worked his way up to position of assistant equestrian director.

He was also on Forepaugh-Sells and while there is said to have worked an act with 65 horses. Curtis married Edna Hoffman, a Baraboo girl, who also became well known in circus circles.

After several seasons with Forepaugh-Sells Curtis went with Sells-Floto as assistant equestrian director. In the early 1920s he left to produce his own acts which played fairs, vaudeville, and winter circuses. His comedy taximeter mule act, performing dogs, and Black Horse Troupe became well known throughout the country. By the mid 1920s Curtis also began producing winter circuses at which he was very successful.

Fred O. (Fearless) Gregg's specialty was operating thrill acts, human cannonball and auto loop the loop cars. He purchased the Cliff Aeros cannon which had been on Sells-Floto in 1929 and soon booked it on Robbins Bros. in 1930. Gregg personally was never the bullet, hiring others for that but using his name in the billing. He had a cannon act at the Atlantic City Steel Pier in 1931. In 1932 he built a new truck mounted cannon.

The first public report of the show came in the February 17 *Billboard* which was headlined, "Curtis and Gregg Launching Circus." The article said that Curtis and Gregg had perfected plans for launching a new motorized circus to be known as Curtis-Gregg Four Bros. Circus which would open at Westmont, Illinois, Curtis' home town, some time around the

## SHORT SKETCHES OF FORMER SHOWS

# CURTIS-GREGG FASHION PLATE CIRCUS

By Joseph T. Bradbury

first of May with first-class equipment and an excellent program. Curtis stated that the Curtis-Gregg Circus had been in the making for some time. The nucleus of the show would be the beautiful, splendidly trained black horse troupe developed by Curtis during the last two seasons, and Gregg's man shot from a cannon act. They were to be featured, and around these acts would be built a show replete with talent.

The show's big top was to be an 80 with four 35s; the kid show a 60 with two 30s, and the cookhouse a 30 x 60. Both Curtis and Gregg already had a number of trucks which they supplemented with a number of new ones. In addition, most of the performers would travel in their own cars, equipped as rolling homes.

Harry Atwell photographed the nine new semi-trailers as they were delivered to the Curtis-Gregg show. All illustrations are from the Pfening Archives.

A month later the *Billboard* said that Curtis and Gregg were coming along nicely with plans for their circus, according to reports emanating from quarters and Plymouth, Wisconsin, where the side show was being framed. An additional note reported Larry Hall, a concession man from Milwaukee, had joined and would have the concessions on the show.

The March 24 *Billboard* gave more information, including a change in title. It noted that Jake Friedman, former side show manager with Christy Bros., was slated to manage the annex with the new Curtis-Gregg Fashion Plate Circus. Friedman advised that the top of the side show tent would be a 50 with

two 30s (a slight change from earlier reports), with seven stages and ten presentations. All new equipment had been ordered. Evidently the new owners decided to shy away from any "brothers" reference and opted for a high sounding moniker Walter L. Main used in the 1890s, as had other shows more recently.

The final March *Billboard* advised that the show was progressing nicely. Word was received from Gregg that everything was going along well in preparation for the launching. He advised that E. E. Coleman's animals, including the large elephant, Mena, would be with the show. Twelve lengths of starbacks seats had been added to the big top equipment. At Plymouth, Wisconsin, all new stages, ticket boxes etc. were being built for the side show. Jack Brisco would be shot from a cannon as a free midway attraction.

The same March 31 *Billboard* carried an advertisement announcing for the first time the opening stand and date. It read: "Curtis-Gregg Fashion Plate Circus.





Opens April 28, Westmont, Illinois. Want family doing 2 or 3 acts, also clowns. Girls for menage, teeth, ladders, single trapeze. Acts with own transportation preferred. Box 547, Westmont, Illinois."

Three weeks later the April 21 *Billboard* carried an informative article headed "Curtis-Gregg Nearly Ready," and reported that Gregg was busy at Westmont, twenty miles west of the Chicago loop, putting the final touches to the equipment. "We are going along swell," said Gregg. "Building of our truck bodies was held up by labor trouble at the manufacturing plant but that has been adjusted and we have a guarantee on delivery." Gregg further stated that J. C. Admire, well known general agent, would pilot the circus. Steve Cass would be in charge of the advance coach. J. L. Barnes would be special agent and handle merchants tickets. F. P. Darr would be press agent, and Les G. Minger, for many years with Robbins Bros. Circus, would be on the front door with two assistants. Herbert Brown was to have the big show band. "Slow Motion" Higgins was to have the black band in side show. Archie Royer, old time clown of 50 years ago, would produce the concert featuring his daughter, Pat "the lady Jack Dempsey."

Other notes said that Curtis had some thirty head of stock that was being worked on daily. E. E. Coleman's dogs and ponies had been added to the stock. Slim Noble and Hank LaGrave had a crew at the Westmont quarters painting all the equipment, most of which had been built new.

There were a couple other items in the same issue. The circus fans section noted that many Circus Fans Association members were looking forward to the opening of the Curtis-Gregg. They proposed going to the initial performance as a body.

Another note said that since Dennie and Edna Curtis were widely known among circus fans and recently the

The Curtis-Gregg ticket-office semi in Edgerton, Wisconsin on May 30, 1934.



The Curtis-Gregg lot on opening day April 28, 1934 in Westmont, Illinois.

Minnesota CFA organized the Dennie and Edna Curtis Top, several of the Curtis' friends were anxious to see the new show off to a flying start. They conceived the idea of getting out a special souvenir ticket and selling it to circus lovers at one dollar each. The ticket was to serve not only as a souvenir but as a season pass to the show. Funds would be turned over to the show and organizers. It was felt this was more practical than sending the usual flowers and telegrams. One of the sponsors of the movement said, "We are sure many circus enthusiasts will want to attend the opening and those who cannot be there will want to catch it when it plays in their vicinity." The article concluded by stating that the response to them had been astonishing, and it was expected that before the show opened several hundred of the souvenir tickets would be ordered. Orders had already been received from as far away as San Antonio, Texas, Washington, and Minneapolis.

This unusual effort of support for Dennie and Edna Curtis was not instigated by circus fans. The April 6, 1934 letter sent to fans was signed by circus photographer Harry A. Atwell, *Billboard* representative Nat Green, and newspaper writer Eugene Whitmore. The letter stated that for \$1 a "handsome ticket, in gold, autographed

by the three owners would be sent." The checks were to be sent to Nat Green at the Chicago office of the *Billboard*. There was no mention of the money going to the show.

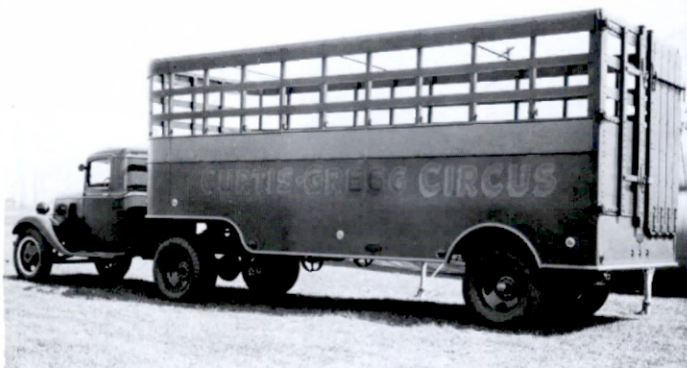
Nine brand new custom built semis from Highway Trailer Co., Edgerton, Wisconsin gave the show a flash rarely seen on motorized circuses of that day, even on the larger shows. Downie Bros. and Barnett Bros., two of the biggest, had numerous homemade truck bodies and cabs. Photos indicate the Curtis-Gregg equipment was painted in a number of color schemes. Light colored lettering on the trucks was probably white on red, and the darker lettering, red on silver, or yellow. Two of the new semis had similar exterior construction with five oval windows at the top and a center door. One was used as the office-ticket unit.

E. E. Coleman of Dayton, Ohio who leased his elephant, Mena, a camel, and several ponies and dogs, furnished his own transportation. His semi was lettered on the sides, "Mena, largest female elephant in America." Coleman, who had purchased the M. L. Clark and Sons Circus, including Mena, in 1929 toured his own show in 1930. After one depression season he elected to shelve it and concentrate on leasing his animals and a steam calliope to other shows. There is

E. E. Coleman's elephant semi on the Curtis-Gregg lot in Edgerton, Wisconsin.







The Curtis-Gregg seat semi-trailer was later on the Seils-Sterling Circus.

no evidence to suggest the steamer was on Curtis-Gregg. Likewise there is none that a street parade was given, however one of the new semis was constructed so it could be used as a bandwagon for downtown bally.

Although the show definitely had a five center pole, four middle piece big top on opening day the performance was given using a three ring format. A report just before the opening said Harold J. Conn, horizontal bars and clown, would return to the white tops having been booked by Curtis-Gregg.

In a rare move the May 5 *Billboard* gave a front page review of the Curtis-Gregg opening. The article was headed "BIG

Newspaper advertisement used by the Curtis-Gregg Fashion Plate Circus.

New 1934 edition of the ultra-modern

# CURTIS-GREGG CIRCUS

FASHION PLATE

Presenting THE WORLD'S SUPER-SENSATION

**SHOOTING A LIVING PERSON OUT OF A BLAZING CANNON!**

Reckless Life and Death in the Broadest Plunge Through the Air!

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**4 TROUPE** MILITARY PONIES

**3 BRASS BANDS** A Great Army of Fanfare

**142 CLOWNS** Performing EDNA EQUESTRIAN BALLET

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**2 PERFORMANCES DAILY - RAIN OR SHINE**  
2 and 8 p. m. - Free Attractions and Band Concerts at 12:45 and 7 p. m.



The Curtis-Gregg Circus light plant was in a straight truck.

SENDOFF FOR NEW SHOW. Curtis-Gregg Fashion Plate Circus pulls good houses at Westmont, initial stand.

"Westmont, Illinois. April 30 Favored by balmy spring weather, sun shining and temperature rising, Curtis-Gregg Fashion Plate Circus played its initial stand here, its home town, Saturday. The matinee, virtually a dress rehearsal, drew a very good house, and at night show almost every seat was filled.

"On hand to wish the new circus good luck were many Circus Fans, some of whom came from as far away as Minneapolis. They, as well as the general public, were loud in praise of the performance, also the physical appearance which ranks with the best on the road. The outfittings made a beautiful appearance on the lot, with massive new trucks of the trailer type, all beautifully painted in attractive colors; attractive new concession stands and canvas, and imposing side show banner line. The rolling stock was what amazed and delighted visiting showmen. The ticket wagon, cafeteria wagon, pole wagon, band wagon and others, all specially designed by F. O. Gregg and built to order. Show has its own lighting plant, also designed by Gregg. In the big top all equipment is high class, and this is true also of the horse top, the dressing rooms, in fact, everything about the show. The present big top, an 80 with four 30s, has been found inadequate, and Curtis-Gregg has already purchased another, a 90 with three 40s, which will be picked up probably within a week. Because of the narrowness of the present top it was not possible to put up all of the seats and the center ring had to be cut a bit, but this will be remedied when the new tent arrives.

"The program is one which should prove pleasing to the public. There are acts that have graced the

larger railroad shows--and would grace them now--and while the opening day's performance was of necessity somewhat rough because there had been no dress rehearsal, it was nevertheless highly pleasing and a credit to the show's owners.

"The show left here yesterday morning for a Sunday date at Harvey, Illinois."

The May 12 *Billboard* listed the staff roster and program: "The program of the Curtis-Gregg Fashion Plate Circus, the opening engagement of which show was announced in the last issue, comprised the following acts, presented in three rings and on track: Tournament, with all performers and ring stock participating. A nice flash, particularly the sextet of black horses, the Hodgini ring stock and performers attractively costumed. Comedy acrobatics, Morris Duo (bar act), Harold Conn and clowning. Ring 1, Aerial Cowdens, double traps; ring 2, Morris girls, balancing traps; ring 3, Aerial DuVals, double traps. Neatly presented. Principal riding act, Harriet Hodgini. Won rounds of applause. Clowns. Ring 1, Hamilton's dogs and ponies; ring 2, Mlle Edna's dogs and ponies; ring 3, DuVal's

Curtis-Gregg poster featuring the Denie Curtis Taxi-meter mule act.

# CURTIS-GREGG CIRCUS

FASHION PLATE

**TAXI-METER MULE - FUNNIEST ACT ON EARTH**





The Curtis Black Horse Troupe on opening day in Westmont, Illinois.

goats and dogs. Entertaining routines. Especially good were Mlle. Edna's dogs in leaps and somersaults. Clowns. Swinging ladders, Miss Morris, Miss Ethel, and Miss Estelle. Liberty horse act, the Black Horse Troupe. One of the finest horse acts to be seen anywhere. Six marvelously trained and presented by Dennie Curtis. Clowns. Slack wire, neatly done by an unbilled girl. Rings 2 and 3, Ethel Marine and Miss Morris, single traps. Miss Marine also worked on web and iron-jaw whirl. Albert Hodgini Family's riding act, Harriet Hodgini working straight and Albert and Albert Jr. doing both comedy and straight. Very clever work by all three. Clown walkaround. Menage horses, Dennie Curtis and Leo Hamilton. Elephant act, Mena, billed as the largest female elephant in captivity, put through neat routines. Aerial iron-jaw, Ethel Marine and Miss Morris. Morris Family, a clever aggregation, three men and two girls, in ground and lofty tumbling, including teeterboard work. This talented group does splendid work. Closing act, Dennie and Edna Curtis Taximeter Mule. One of the best comedy acts extant. The

This Curtis-Gregg semi carried props, ring curb and big top furnishings.



Curtis-Gregg big top canvas and seat semi-trailer.

clowns include Harold Conn, Cliff O. Downing, C. Gillette, Morris Trio, and Paul Smith.

"Jake Friedman, formerly with 101 Ranch Wild West and other shows, manages the side show, which had a beautiful banner line, entirely new and making a wonderful flash. In the show are Tommy Stevens and his colored band; Ethel Friedman (Mercedes), dancer; Mne. Alice, snakes; Larry Benner, Punch and Judy, magic, and ventriloquist; Tom Oliver, knife thrower; Ed Nelson, sword swallower, and several cages of small animals. On tickets are Thomas O'Connell and Ben Willis.

"The concession end of the show is in the hands of L. L. Hall of Milwaukee, who has provided a fine assortment of concession equipment. Assisting him during the initial week Mrs. Hall and their daughter, Ruby. The concession tops are all new. Several novelty stands have gay umbrella tops. Attendants are all neatly dressed.

"The staff of the circus in addition to Dennie Curtis, F. O. Gregg and Mrs. Edna Curtis; Albert Sigsbee, general agent; J. L. Barnes, advance ticket man; Steve Cass, in charge of billposters; Lea Minger, legal adjuster and auditor; Leo Hamilton, ringmaster; Ralph Noble, boss canvasman; Jake Friedman, side show manager; Floyd Harvey, electrician; Mr. and Mrs. Floyd

Arndt, cookhouse; Walter Reed, boss hostler; Bill Rice, publicity and advance; F. P. Darr, bannerman; Paul Karacunas, in charge of dog wagon. The Brown Family Band plays for the big show. The concert, in charge of Archie Royer, featured Patty Royer, the 'lady Jack Dempsey.' John Brisko, 'living cannon ball' will be the free act."

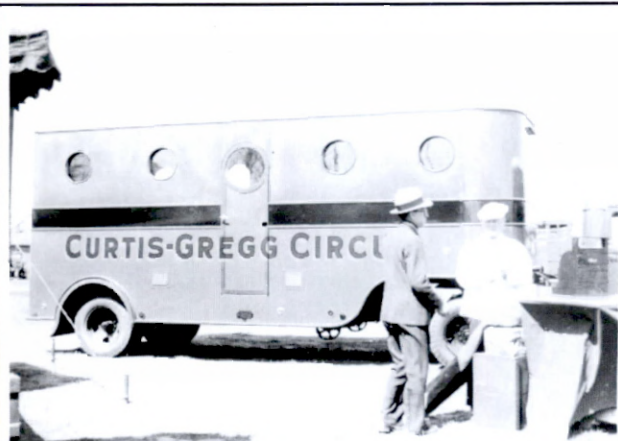
The *White Tops* reported twenty-five CFA members and their families attended the show's opening. One of these was Burt Wilson, prominent Chicago CFA, who took some of the photos printed here. He photographed Gregg's cannon but recorded in his photo album that it did not operate at the initial stand. Also on hand was noted circus photographer Harry Atwell who lined up the visiting fans and well wishers on and in front of one of the new semis. Curtis and Gregg stood at one side of the group. Atwell's photo was printed in the *Billboard*.

In the same *Billboard* as the Atwell photo the show's advance department was listed. Albert Sigsbee was general agent; L. S. Aylesworth, press agent; Steve Cass,

Curtis-Gregg Circus horse semi-trailer on opening day.







The second semi-trailer with five circular openings.

car manager; C. L. Peer and Ed Hays, lithographers; John Sharp, Art Jackson and Jim Clark, billposters; Adam Schafer, programmer.

Following Westmont the show next played a Sunday date at Harvey, Illinois and it became the show's policy to play on Sundays when local regulations permitted. The final day in April saw the show moving into Indiana at Valpariso, followed by LaPorte, South Bend, Elkhart, Goshen, Warsaw, then two days, May 6-7, at Columbia City.

Continuing in the Hoosier state the show visited Ft. Wayne, Huntington, Wabash, Montpelier, with the final stand coming at Decatur on May 12.

The *Billboard* said that the date in Decatur saw two capacity audiences. Curtis-Gregg was the first circus of the year but was soon followed by Banard Bros. which opened there the next Thursday, and also played to good business. Jack Croake joined Curtis-Gregg there as legal adjuster.

The route next took the show into Ohio at Celina, followed by Van Wert, Paulding, Bryan, Montpelier, then into Michigan at Coldwater on May 18. It was at Sturgis on the 19th and Niles on May 21. On May 22 the show played Michigan City, Indiana, then went into Illinois at Jo-

liet, followed by Villa Park, Des Plaines, and Waukegan.

A *Billboard* report dated Chicago, June 2, said that F. Robert Saul, newly appointed press representative of the Curtis-Gregg Fashion Plate Circus, wrote that business has been on the upgrade during the prior two days (the stands not identified) and better business was expected from now on. Other notes stated that Bert Rutherford had joined as general agent and was assisted by W. Reid of Marion, Ohio, as brigade agent. Leonard Ayresworth was special agent ahead handling heralds and was being assisted by his wife, Millie. The Moore Family of seven people also joined and were presenting wire walking, aerial, acrobatic, and clown numbers. They were also featured in a skating act in the performance.

Another *Billboard* report said that Fred Gregg had severed his connection with the show and that Walter L. Main and an unidentified Wisconsin man had taken an interest in the show.

Although the *Billboard* had carried the show's route each week that suddenly stopped following the date at Waukegan,

Circus fan friends of Dennie and Edna Curtis posed on the pole semi on opening day. Fred Gregg and Dennie Curtis are standing at far left. The net for the cannon free is at the left.



The Curtis-Gregg Circus side show banner line.

Illinois on May 26. This was often a sure sign that all was not well with a show. After Waukegan the show played Harvard, Illinois; Delavan, Edgerton, Oconomoc and Waukesha, Wisconsin. The show closed in West Allis, Wisconsin on June 2.

Further stands at Hartford, Port Washington, Plymouth, Oshkosh and Meosha, Wisconsin had been contracted and billed.

At West Allis a payment due the Highway Trailer Company on the new vehicles couldn't be made. Representatives of the company appeared on the lot and repossessed the equipment thus finishing off the Curtis-Gregg Fashion Plate.

The June 16 *Billboard* told the story of the show's closing: "After five weeks on the road the Curtis-Gregg Fashion Plate Circus closed at West Allis, Wisconsin, Sunday, June 3. Dennie Curtis returned to Westmont, Illinois with the equipment."

"The show had poor business from the start and also encountered other difficulties. At West Allis attorneys for the company from whom the rolling stock was purchased took possession of the trucks when payments could not be met. F. O. Gregg meanwhile had left the show. Dennie Curtis got in touch with Ed F. Carruthers, who attempted to arrange a deal to continue the show, but terms could not be arranged and the show folded.

"Performers and other employees were loyal to Curtis to the last, the workmen remaining with him until the equipment was in the barns at Westmont.

"It is understood Curtis will attempt to reorganize the show shortly."

No details were given on how Curtis arranged to have all of the equipment and animals loaded and moved to Westmont, whether or not it could be put onto the remaining vehicles, which would be doubtful. In all probability trucks had to be hired for the move.

Curtis was unable to get the show on







The Curtis-Gregg five pole big top at Edgerton, Wisconsin on May 30, 1934.

the road again. Nothing further was said about Walter L. Main or the unidentified man from Wisconsin who were supposedly interested in it.

In the meantime E. E. Coleman sent his elephant Mena to join Howard King's Rice Bros. Circus until July 4. A few weeks later Mena went to W. F. Duggan's newly organized Duggan Bros. Circus framed from the equipment of Harrington's Nickel Plate Shows. Curtis along with his wife soon furnished several circus acts at the Lagoon Theater at the Century of Progress World's Fair in Chicago, then in its second season. The acts were his black horse troupe, Mlle Edna's dogs, and the comedy mule number. Initially Curtis signed for a limited time only but in September the *Billboard* said the acts would stay until the close of the fair, after

E. E. Coleman's elephant Mena was leased to the Curtis-Gregg show.



which Curtis would probably play a series of indoor engagements.

George Chindahl's history of the Seils-Sterling Circus in the September October 1957 *White Tops* stated that the show purchased semi trucks which had been on the Curtis-Gregg Circus. He mentioned an auction but none was documented in the trade publications. In all probability the vehicles were purchased directly from the Highway Trailer Co.

Seils-Sterling may have purchased these trucks shortly after Curtis-Gregg folded. In the September 8 *Billboard* one of the two semis with five oval windows at the top was pictured in use as the Seils-Sterling No. 2 advance car. A lot photo in Chindahl's article taken in 1936 pictures two of the five oval window semis on the Seils-Sterling lot. One was used as the ticket wagon, and another parked by the menagerie. The Seils-Sterling show bought at least five of the Curtis-Gregg semis. Additionally the pole wagon, seat semi and property semi appear in Seils-Sterling 1935 photos. The Curtis-Gregg light plant truck does not appear on Seils-Sterling. The disposition of the rest of the trucks, including those retained by Curtis, plus the tents, seating, and other equipment is not known.

A 1967 letter to Paul Lucky from Edna Curtis told of the show: "We closed the Curtis Gregg Fashion Plate Circus June 2, 1934. We took the big top home in the truck we owned, the other trucks were sent back to the factory that built them as the payments were not made on them due to poor business. We later heard that the Lindeman brothers secured two of the trucks from the factory that built them.

"Our horses, dogs, ponies and mule we shipped home by rail to our Westmont, Illinois home. Gregg's home was in Plymouth, Wisconsin. He took his cannon shooting truck back to Plymouth.

"Very fortunately shortly after closing the Curtis-Gregg Circus we secured in late June a date at the Century of Progress then operating. Our engagement was for three weeks however it lasted for twenty-



Fred Gregg's truck-mounted cannon on a Curtis-Gregg lot.

one weeks at the Lagoon open air theatre. Mr. Thompson of the Thompson restaurants demanded that the Curtis attractions remain for the duration of the Fair. His business at the restaurants over looked the setting of the circus and his business was colossal.

"We still hold the record of any circus acts playing in one spot for 20 1/2 weeks. We did three shows per day, every day of the week with three acts making nine acts per day."

Dennie Curtis continued to present his acts until shortly before his death on April 13, 1938. At that time he was scheduled to open two days later with Cole Bros. in the Chicago Stadium. His widow, Edna, several years later married Jorgen M. Christensen, well known horse trainer.

One momento of the Curtis-Gregg Circus remains in the form of one of the five oval window semis that went to Seils-Sterling. It is currently at the Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin, painted and lettered with the Seils-Sterling title.

Some information in this article came from the Circus World Museum and the Pfening Archives.

## FOR SALE TO BEST OFFER

### BANDWAGON MAGAZINES

July 1971-current issues.  
Reason for selling  
Moving to smaller space.

John M. Garber (CHS 1989)  
627 Franklin Ave.  
Lancaster, OH 43130



**A**l G. Barnes was one of America's greatest wild animal showmen. His circus always featured an array of wild animal acts of all types. His slogan was, "Every animal an actor, every actor an animal." Certainly the most outstanding attraction of his circus was his elephant herd. Aside from the four famous male elephants, Tusko, Black Diamond, Vance and Barney, his female elephants were the finest on exhibition anywhere. Their great condition was no accident. Many of this country's top trainers and handlers attended them through the years.

In 1908 Al G. Barnes incorporated his show and bought his first elephant, the remarkable Ruth. That same year he purchased two more elephants, Jewel and Babe, from animal dealer Louis Ruhe during a buying trip to New York.

Ruth, Jewel and Babe became the standbys of the Barnes herd. They did everything, the barber shop routine, played baseball and football, and did the head carry.

Working in harness, they got the show



Sidney Rink and four small elephants on Barnes in 1914. C. Beerntsen collection.

on and off many a lot. Tim Buckley was the first trainer in charge of this trio from 1908 to 1911. Bill Emery took over in 1912. Emery was surely one of the most underrated elephant trainers in the circus game. He was employed by many shows and trained many elephants, but received little acclaim. During the 1912 season Ruth, Jewel and Babe learned a lot from him.

E. J. Johnson handled the Barnes elephants in 1913. Sidney Rink, who worked mules and ponies on the show in 1913, took over the elephants in 1914, a season that saw a most unusual display, that of bears riding elephants.

Babe, a young elephant, was purchased from the M. L. Clark Circus in January 1913. Her name was changed to Pearl. In March 1916, the Japanese ship *Chiyo Maru*

# The Barnes Show ELEPHANTS 1908-1938

By Bill Johnston

arrived in the port of San Francisco with a dwarf male elephant aboard. He was shipped to the Barnes winter quarters in Venice, California. Barney, as he was named, stood 4 1/2 feet tall and was tough. He soon became an escape artist, slipping his chains on occasions, and then proceeding to destroy everything in sight. He made up in ill temper what he lacked in size.

In June 1916 the Japanese ship *Tenyo Maru* docked in San Francisco with a cargo of wild animals including three baby elephants, a male and two females. William Vance Hill, agent for Barnes, unloaded the animals and kept them in a barn for a month before shipping them to the show. The male was named Vance after Hill. They arrived on the show at Watertown, Wisconsin. One of the females died. The other cannot be accounted for. She either died or was sold.

Rink trained Barney to work in a seal act. Barney and Vance also pulled a two wheeled cart in the street parades and in the spectacle. One day during the tournament, before a jammed house with people strawed on the ground, Barney, who was on the outside position while pulling the cart, lunged at an audience member. Luckily the elephant's tusks went around the man. After that Barney always had the inside position during the walkaround.

Ruth, Jewel, Babe and Pearl worked as a harness team pulling the tiger cage wagon in street parades, aside from their many other tasks.

In 1919 Cheerful Gardner was hired as menagerie superintendent. Rink still

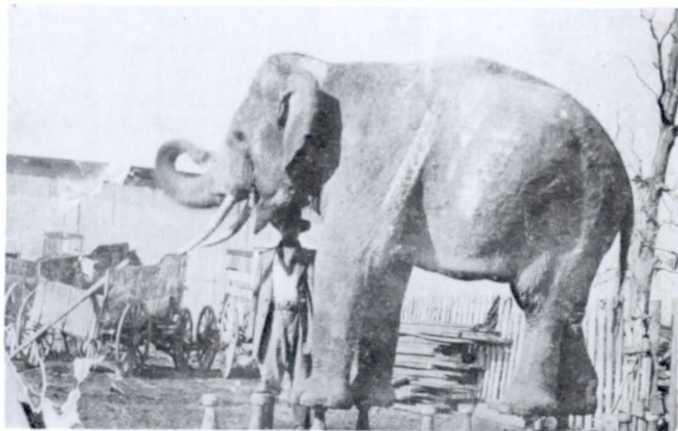
had the elephants. That fall Barnes bought another elephant named Mabel. She had spent her early years on the Glasscock Shows, then toured with Howes Great London from 1911 to 1916. Mabel was sold to J. Augustus Jones in 1917. Joe Metcalf had Mabel and the tusker Black Diamond on the Howard

Bros. Circus before it folded in 1918. She was then bought by William P. Hall. She was with the Lamont Circus in 1919, then back to Hall, and from there to Barnes. Her name became Jenny, and she was teamed with Babe. This pair trouped together for many years on Barnes and later on Ringling-Barnum.

Gardner took over the Barnes elephants in 1920. He had some fine assistance from Clyde H. "High Pockets" Baudendistel. Gardner, the old master, developed an all new act for 1921 with the herd playing huge musical instruments. At the Minneapolis, Minnesota stand, July 5-6, the huge elephant Ned arrived, a memorable event in Barnes elephant history. At that time he was the largest bull elephant in the country.

Ned had quite a career in the circus business before Barnes. William F. Smith operated a small railroad circus beginning in 1898. In 1902 he bought a baby male elephant from William Bartels in New York. The elephant was put in a crate and shipped by express to the show in Bayou Sare, Louisiana where he was given the name Ned. Dan Leon, a horse trainer, broke Ned for Smith. At the end of the 1903 season Smith sold his show at Macon, Georgia and Ned was bought by the M. L. Clark circus. The price to Clark was the same that Smith had paid, \$1800. On the Clark show Ned was handled by Charlie Cole, a black man. Clark's circus was on wagons, and Ned walked from

Charles Cole and Ned on the M. L. Clark show. Author's collection.







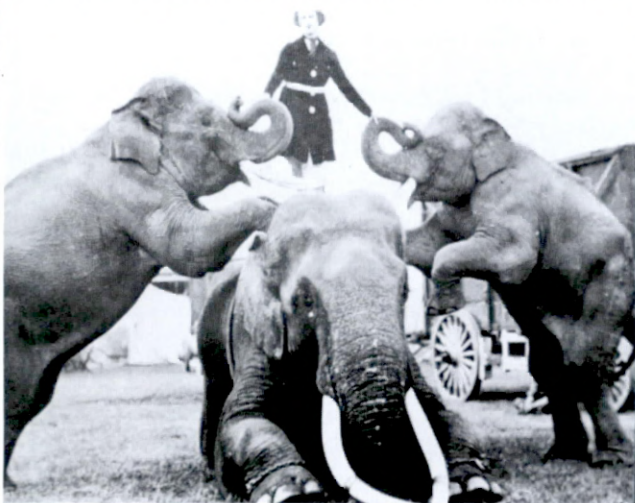
Vance and Barney pulling a cart in a 1918 Barnes parade. Chet Slusser collection.

town to town. This contributed to making him the largest and healthiest bull elephant in the country. On February 2, 1913 Ned was set for a fight with a Mexican bull, in Juarez, Mexico. Clark was supposed to get \$2500, plus prints of a film that was to be made. Five bulls were brought into the ring, but none would fight Ned. The Mexicans became very upset and the police confiscated the film. They tried to fine Clark \$500 but during the night, he slipped back over the border to El Paso with Ned.

Barnes paid \$6000 for Ned and re-named him Tusko. Many wild stories have been told about Tusko, most of which are untrue. Tusko never killed anyone. During musth periods, like any male elephant, he would become unruly. His weakness was walking away whenever he got the urge and then his tremendous strength created some havoc.

Tusko was kept in the menagerie in 1921, but the next year he appeared in street parades. Barnes would ride in a

Vance, Tusko and Barney with Babe Gardner in 1922. Author's collection.



howdah on Tusko at the end of the opening spec. During the 1922 season Tusko performed in the ring handled by Baudendistel. In this display, Gardner worked seven elephants in a fast moving routine.

The show closed the 1922 season in Gainesville, Texas and moved into Love Field, Dallas

for the winter. Gardner and Baudendistel left the show reportedly to go to Africa to bring back a shipment of twenty-seven African elephants. This never happened;

instead they joined the John Robinson Circus. Nathan W. "Red" McKay became the Barnes boss elephant man. Around this time the ship *Bearport* docked in the port of Los Angeles with a huge cargo of wild animals. Included were four baby elephants. McKay went to California and picked up the elephants. One of these babies was sold to the Dallas Zoo. The others were named Palm, Venice and Culver.

Tusko began acting up during the 1923 season. That fall it was decided to leave him in winter quarters at Palm, California during the 1924 tour. He remain there until 1927. For reasons never explained Venice was traded to the Milwaukee zoo on June 8, 1923. In return the show received Countess, an adult female elephant. At the end of the 1924 season Barney was sold to a Mexican circus. An unverified story states that Barney was put in an arena to fight lions on this circus. He dispatched the lions easily. Then some bulls were tried. He also killed them with no trouble, along with a couple of Mexicans. The circus owner gave up in despair and had Barney shot.

The elephant Lois joined the Barnes herd in 1925. She had been with the Walter L. Main Circus in the 1920s. The Main elephants were later sold to the Miller Bros. 101 Ranch

wild west show, with the exception of Lois who wound up on the Barnes show.

On May 21, 1925, four young elephants arrived on the Barnes show at Sedro-Wooley, Washington. The lone male was called Sedro who remained with the show that season but then disappeared.

The names of the three females are unknown, nor do we know anything about their disposition. That year there were many zoo transactions involving baby elephants and we can only surmise that they went into zoos.

Several elephant trainers worked for the Barnes show from 1926 through 1929. Among them were Jimmy Young, Frank Leggett, Oscar "Sippy" Nance, and Earl "Bullhook" Jackson.

In 1926 Culver was sold to C. R. Holmes, an animal dealer, who in turn



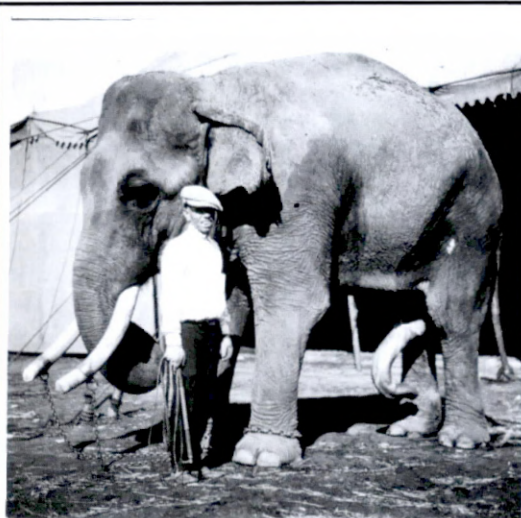
James Dooley with the male Sedro and three females on May 21, 1925. Bob Bernard photo.

donated her to the San Diego zoo on August 11, 1926.

Tragedy struck on the night of August 3, 1928 when the elephant Countess dropped dead on the way to the show train.

That year one of the most outstanding bull elephants in circus history, Black Diamond, joined the Barnes herd. Diamond had been a punk on the Gentry Bros. circus in 1900. He remained there until 1914 and then along with the female Trilby was sold to William P. Hall. He was part of a five act with Alice, Annie, Lizzie and Boo on the Barton and Bailey circus in 1915. He then was on Wheeler Bros. Enormous Shows in 1916. In 1917 and 1918 he was with the R. T. Richards Circus. Diamond was back with Hall in 1919, then was sold to the Atterbury show. Bill Woodcock Sr. came to this show in 1924 and handled Diamond. On New Year's day 1926 Diamond killed Ben Sweet, an old showhand, at Olton, Texas. Diamond was with Wilson's Greater Shows in 1927, and then was sold to Barnes. Jack Grady became his handler. Barnes sold his circus





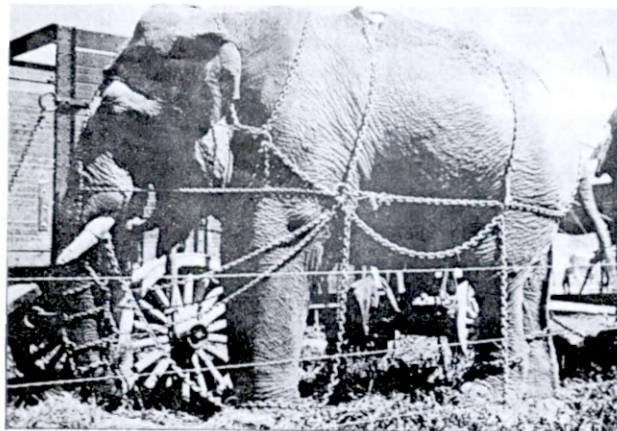
Curley Pritchett with Black Diamond shortly after the elephant arrived on Barnes in 1928. Pfening Archives.

to the American Circus Corporation, on January 5, 1929 and the new owners decided to leave Tusko in quarters for 1929.

On October 12, 1929, the Barnes show arrived in Corsicana, Texas. On the way from the show train to the lot, the elephants were stopped momentarily in town by some parked cars. Waiting there was Curley Pritchett, an ex-circus hand who had handled Diamond on the Atterbury show before Woodcock. With him was his lady friend Eva Donehoe. The two began talking to the elephant hands. All was well until Ms. Donehoe reached out and touched Diamond. Instantly Diamond grabbed Pritchett and tossed him over a car. The elephant then snatched Donehoe and threw her to the ground and ran his tusks through her. Pritchett escaped unharmed. Black Diamond was executed by a firing squad at Kennedy, Texas on October 16, 1929 for his actions.

In 1930 and 1931 Joe Metcalf, a veteran handler of bad elephants, was Barnes su-

Tusko in chains in the Barnes quarters in 1930. Author's collection



perintendent of elephants. Freida, an old Sells-Foto elephant, came to the Barnes herd in 1931. Tusko was back on the show in 1930 and 1931. While at Portland, Oregon on May 25-26, 1931 Tusko was sold to Al Painter. Painter, a promoter, planned to use him at the Lotus Isle Park. However, Tusko was more than Painter had bargained for. He tried to give him to the city of Portland but it refused his offer. Tusko was then moved to Salem, Oregon, for the state fair. This turned out to be a blank and he was left with the State Fair Association. They auctioned him off for \$200 to Henry Plant of Salem. Plant in turn gave Tusko to Bayard "Sleepy" Gray and Jack Grady, two elephant men.

They somehow managed to get Tusko back to Portland and into an old building on the east side of the city. Expecting to make money by exhibiting Tusko, they were soon disappointed, and found themselves without money to buy feed. The state humane society and some farmers stepped in. They provided enough money to keep Tusko alive and happy. The old building was unheated, and the weather turned cold. Tusko became ill. To help ease his condition they fed him some toddy made from several gallons of corn liquor. Tusko went on a spree tossing hay bales and anything else handy with wild abandon. He finally passed out. Eventually fortune smiled and Tusko found a home at the Seattle zoo. He lived there until June 10, 1933 when he died from a blood clot on his brain.

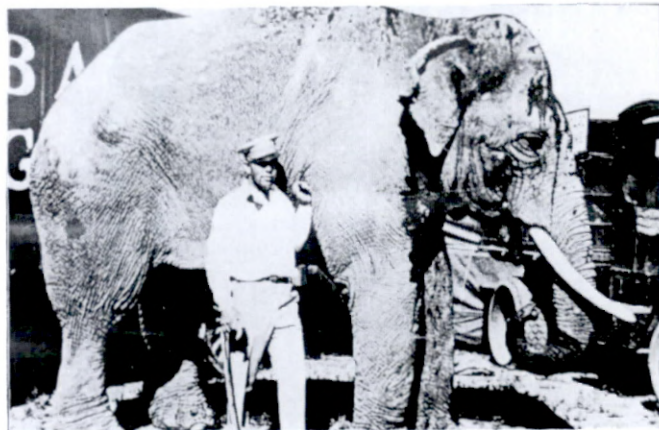
In September 1929 the American Circus Corporation was purchased by John Ringling. During the following years, there was lot of shifting of elephants between Ringling-Barnum and the ACC shows.

In 1933 five ex-Floto elephants became part of the Barnes herd. These were, Kas, Floto Trilby, Tony, Josky and Floto Jenny. Kas had been bought by Sells-Floto from Louis Ruhe in 1909 and remained with that show until 1933. Trilby was an old timer, dating back to the Otto Flotoshow in 1904. Josky was



Joe Metcalf with Ruth on Barnes in 1930. Author's collection.

originally sold by William P. Hall to Ed Ballard for the Hagenbeck-Wallace show, then moved to Sells Floto in 1929. Floto Jenny followed the same route as Jo-



Walter McClain with Vance. Author's collection.

sky. Tony had been on Floto since 1926.

Metcalf left the Barnes show in mid-1932 and Walter McClain took over the herd. McClain had broken in under Louis Reed on the Sparks show. When Reed left, he became the Sparks elephant boss. McClain was a great herd-man, specializing in harness elephants. He believed elephants should pull wagons to and from the lots. Later on Ringling-Barnum he used elephant teams to pull wagons off the show train.

Minnie and Dolly, two Ringling-Barnum elephants, joined the Barnes herd in 1934. They had been together as a team for years. During the 1935 season, Wal-





lace Modoc, Topsy, Mary and the male, Tommy were added to the Barnes herd.

Wallace Modoc was on the Gollmar Bros. circus in 1922, the John Robinson Circus in 1923 and 1924, and then Hagenbeck-Wallace from 1925 to 1933. She was at Baldwin Park in 1934. Topsy was on Floyd and Howard King's Walter L. Main circus in 1927 and 1928. She was bought by Sells Floto in 1930 and was on Hagenbeck-Wallace before coming to Barnes. Mary, an ex-Sparks elephant, came to Ringling-Barnum after the Sparks circus' demise in 1931. The male Tommy was imported as a punk by Sells-Floto in 1922. He was transferred to Hagenbeck-Wallace from 1931 to 1933 and then went to Baldwin Park in 1934.

The Barnes show began wintering at Baldwin Park, California in 1927. After the Ringling takeover of the ACC many elephants were kept there from time to time. This was especially true in 1934 and 1935. Housed there during this period were the females Wallace Modoc, Sally, Queen, Vic and Joyce, and the males, Tommy, Prince, Charley Ed and Ringling Joe. The males were used in the the film *Clive of India* in 1934. Sally and Queen worked in the film *O'Shaughnessy's Boy* made in 1935. However only Wallace

Two groups of four elephants in harness pulling cages off a muddy Barnes lot around 1934. Pfening Archives.

Modoc and Tommy ever went on the road with the Barnes show.

On June 12, 1935 at Cranbrook, British Columbia the male Vance killed elephant hand Jesse Wardlow. A month later on July 9 at North Bay, Ontario a baggage car was contracted, and Vance, along with Tommy, were loaded inside. Ray Norris and Charles Morris accompanied the two bulls back to Peru, Indiana. On August 4 Omar Cole, a wealthy sportsman and big game hunter, fired two bullets into the brain of Vance, causing instant death. Shortly after on August 22 Tommy was also executed.

For 1937 and 1938, the show was titled Al G. Barnes and Sells Floto Combined Circus. Old Pearl died at Hibbing, Minnesota on August 2, 1937. On May 26, 1938, at Everett, Washington, the entire Barnes elephant herd was weighed. It was no surprise to find the heaviest was Babe, tipping the scale at 10,626 pounds, and Jewel at 10,055 pounds. Lightest was

The Al G. Barnes-Sells-Floto Circus herd of eighteen elephants in 1937-38. Pfening Archives.

Mary at 5,970. Average weight for the herd of seventeen was 7,990 pounds.

The 1938 season was a disastrous one for circuses. Many had to close early, some for good. The Ringling-Barnum circus was no exception. Hampered by labor unions, the Big One was forced to fold its big top at Scranton, Pennsylvania, on June 22, 1938. The show train headed back to Sarasota, Florida. The Barnes show kept rolling along.

In July Ringling-Barnum sent some acts and animals to join the Barnes show. Included in this contingent were four elephants: Big Modoc, Barnum Queen, and two African forest elephants, Puqua and Sudan. Big Modoc was a great old elephant who had a long and colorful career. She was imported in February 1898, and was owned by Leon Washburn from 1904 to 1910, then by James Patterson from 1911 to 1925. She was then on the Floyd and Howard King shows from 1925 to 1930, and was then sold to Ringling-Barnum.

Puqua, Sudan and a male, Congo, were African forest elephants, sometimes called pygmies, imported by Ringling-Barnum in 1935. Congo made one season, then died in February 1936. Barnum Queen was a real veteran of the big tops. Originally a Barnum elephant, she went with Ringling-Barnum after the combine in 1919. In 1921 she was sold to Hagenbeck in Germany, but the next year was resold to the Sparks circus. Queen mothered the young Africans so was kept around despite her age.

The 1938 season was the last year for the Barnes title. But it was not the end for the Barnes elephants. The Barnes and Sells-Floto Circus closed in Sarasota, Florida, on November 27, 1938. The Barnes herd had a new home as most of them spent many more years trouping with the Big One.

Most of the material for this article was supplied by the great elephant historian, the late Chang Reynolds. I respectfully dedicate this article to his memory. My thanks also to Bill Woodcock, Jr. and the Pfening Archives.





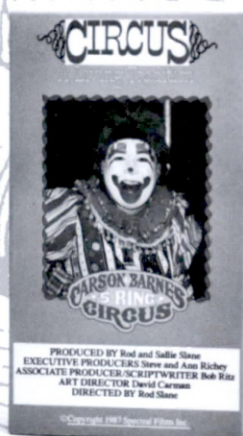
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**T**he adoption of the cookhouse by circuses was a direct reflection of the increase in the size of companies in the years just before the Civil War. Since the beginning

of tented touring employees had been lodged and fed in hotels along the route. When the entire personnel of a company was about thirty people—performers and workmen—the cost and availability of hotel living was not a major item. A man and a horse could be fed and housed for as little as fifty cents a day or as much as a dollar depending on the local price structure. This sum provided two meals and half a bed for the man, feed and straw for the animal as well as stabling at the hotel.

As the size of rosters expanded in the 1850's managers began to seek some relief from the added costs of food and lodging. Also, the number of people employed began to strain the resources of small town hostleries. Most hotels could put up twenty or so guests, two to a bed, thus a circus company had to take rooms in several inns in order to have accommodation. In the smaller towns it was possible not to find enough rooms to accommodate a hundred people. One solution was to spread straw on the floor of a room, nail a tarpaulin over it and let as many working men squeeze in as could. A better solution was to feed and house the workmen, but not the staff and performers, on the lot.

James E. Cooper, proprietor of the Adam Forepaugh Show, died on the first day of the year 1892. In its obituary of this man the *New York Clipper* of January 9 called him "one of the greatest showmen of the world." It also stated that in 1864 he had originated the cook tent, blacksmith shop and horse tent on the circus lot.

This information was supplied to the *Clipper* by the showman himself during his lifetime, according to editorial comment in the 30 January issue. At two different intervals he had sent minute biographical data to the publication. The reason for the editor's stating this was a letter received from a reader disputing the fact that Cooper had introduced the cook house and the horse tent.

The writer, William M. Davis Jr., was characterized by the *Clipper* as a veteran showman, as indeed he was. Davis had begun his career with the James Raymond organization in 1845, and remained with it through the season of 1851. In 1852 he became an agent for the Mabie show and was with that company nine consecutive years. In the fall of 1857 he was named manager, a position he held through 1860.

# THE FIRST COOKHOUSE

BY STUART THAYER

In 1861 he reverted to agent. Of his subsequent career we know only that he was with W. W. Cole in 1871, Cole's first year as an independent operator. After that season Davis retired.

Under date of 19 January 1892 he wrote the *Clipper* to say that he, Davis, not Cooper had originated the idea of a camp outfit ("camp" was the contemporary term for "lot") and said "While acting as manager in 1857 I prevailed on the Mabies to get a cooking outfit and sleeping and horse tents, contending that sooner or later all shows would be compelled to do similarly. [Jerry] Mabie went to Cincinnati and ordered a camp outfit consisting of sleeping tents for seventy people, a dining tent, cook wagon and horse tents, the outfit costing about \$1,500. The same year I introduced the concert under the large tent. These two radical changes, proving successful, were soon taken up by other shows, and have continued to the present time."

What Davis' letter does not make clear was that the equipment was first used in 1858. He suggested it, however, in 1857.

His claim was quickly verified by two veteran showmen, James DeMott and George S. Cole. Both members of the Mabie aggregation, DeMott as clown and Cole as treasurer, wrote in, their missives appearing in the 6 February issue.

I wish to confirm the statement of William Davis," DeMott wrote, "in reference to the first camp or cooking apparatus for the accommodation of circuses. The range in the wagon was the most complete I have ever seen, and the wagon was finely furnished. They also carried tents for men to sleep in, with portable bedsteads and air pillows. This, I think, was before the late J. E. Cooper thought of the show business at all." Cooper's first essay into circus life was, indeed, not until 1863.

Cole merely seconded Davis' description. Then, James Esler, ringmaster for Mabie in 1856 and most of 1857, put his two-cents worth in via a letter in the issue of 13 February in which he said that it was 1858, not 1857 in which the camping outfit was first used. He had misread Davis' description. Further, Esler said that it was Walter Waterman's idea. He had this, he claimed, from Jerry Mabie himself. This makes no difference in the awarding to the Mabie's of the prize for introduction of the cookhouse, but Esler

then proceeded to name the personnel of the 1857 "Mabie's Grand Consolidation of Circus and Menagerie," its full title, and thereby raised our suspicion that he was confused. He says

E. W. Perry was equestrian manager (it was W. H. Stout); that Bobbie Williams was clown (he wasn't on the show); that the Holland family were present (they weren't). And, to top all of it off, Walter Waterman was not with the Mabie aggregation in either 1857 or 1858. Davis pointed these errors out in his last letter, which was printed on 27 February.

"The dispute is an amicable one," he wrote, "and while not particularly valuable to the general public, it is not devoid of interest to the circus fraternity." And to circus historians, we might add. "There does not seem to be much controversy about my being the first to introduce camp life," Davis concluded.

Davis had been involved in the earliest example of feeding on the lot, oddly enough, though he didn't mention it in his letters to the *Clipper*. In 1851 he was on the staff of the Raymond & Van Amburgh menagerie when that company experimented with the idea. The *Hancock Journal* of Fostoria, Ohio editorialized on 15 August of that year "on the niggard disposition of the proprietors in refusing to be accommodated by our local landlords during their stay . . . they erected a shanty and fried their bacon by a camp fire." Whether or not the working men also slept on the lot was not indicated, nor do we think they fed on the lot in subsequent seasons. One question we have is if Davis urged Jerry Mabie to purchase the camp outfit because he had seen the Raymond & Van Amburgh experiment.

As Davis indicated, the improvements cost about \$1,500. They were bought from the Vandiver tent people in Cincinnati and he said they were delivered in a month. Since seventy men and as many as fifty horses and three elephants were housed and fed under the new arrangement, we would estimate that the saving in hotel costs over a season would amount to roughly \$5,000.

With this size of a saving one would suppose that every showman would rush to purchase a camp outfit, but our research, which is not detailed after 1860, does not reveal another use of the innovation until 1866 when Gardner & Hemmings adopted it.

We must thank John Polacsek for the reference in the Fostoria, Ohio newspaper.



Big Top Boss John Ringling North and the Circus by David Lewis Hammarstrom (University of Illinois Press, 1992, \$29.95)

This is a book that every circus fan will devour, as I did, at a very fast clip, for David Lewis Hammarstrom's new book, *Big Top Boss: John Ringling North and the Circus*, is one of the best researched and written circus books ever, and a great contribution to the documented history of America's 20th century circus scene.

*Big Top Boss* demonstrates Hammarstrom's genuine enthusiasm for his topic and a true dedication to doing the story right with an unbiased thoroughness that's both admirable and sorely needed in the world of circus books. One hopes that this book, written to the standards of the best celebrity biographies, will, unlike most circus books, get a reasonable promotional push nationwide as it deserves an audience wider than that of just the die hard circus enthusiasts. John Ringling North's story is much more than just a tome about some faceless circus promoter who happens to be a scion of the famous Ringling circus family; it's a gripping dramatic tale gloriously wrapped around the grit and grime of circus life that many unproclaimed circus fans will thoroughly enjoy, too.

It's fitting and long overdue that nearly 25 years after saying *au revoir* (one of North's oft-used phrases in circus programs of the day) to his *Greatest Show on Earth*, North has finally been accorded the prestige and dignity of his own, first class biography (one earlier effort by another writer several years ago yielded a much less informative and a poorly edited run at telling North's story).

Probably no Ringling family member took more knocks from circus fans than did North. Even today, one gets the feeling that some more conservative circus buffs still hold North's legacy in suspicion and don't exert themselves to analyze in retrospect some of his more innovative achievements, both under the canvas and hardtop big tops.

First and foremost, points out Hammarstrom, North was born showman, capable, in some years during his reign as circus king, of producing many of the best Ringling circus shows in history. It was North, and his brother Henry (still active and living in Switzerland), who brought the world Gargantua, next to Jumbo the most famous circus animal sensation ever. It was also North who scouted and showcased the likes of Alfred Court, Harold Alzana (one of his favorites), Tito Gao-

## STAR BACK REVIEW



na, and the great Unus, to name just a few.

It was also North who toured and exhibited the world's largest elephant herd in captivity (55 bulls for the 1955 show), put the circus on television for the first time, exported a second unit to South America, (for the first time that the Ringling show had ever appeared outside North America), oversaw the filming of Hollywood's greatest circus epic, DeMille's *Greatest Show on Earth*, and imported the Ringling show's first ever iron curtain acts. Not least of all, it was North who presided over the perilous and amazing transition of the circus from big tops to buildings.

From the mid 1930s to the late 1960s, with some absent years resulting from Ringling family turmoils over management and control of the circus, North presided over Big Bertha's most tumultuous yet exciting decades and he produced many of the Ringling show's most memorable and colorful performances.

Costumes, lights, amplification, and other aesthetic touches flourished under North's management; even the midway got his attention with the famous industrial designer Norman Bel Geddes signing on to redesign the show's physical look, from fancy ring carpets to midway towers and other colorful touches, which added a lot of theatrical ambiance to the circus lot, inside and out.

North, as Hammarstrom points out, had an enigmatic and distant personality, and few people really got close to him. Other than brother Henry, one-time circus executive Rudy Bundy, and the legendary Art Concello, few other members of the long standing Ringling circus regulars got to know North on an intimate level. There were some years when North took an active interest in the circus, tirelessly planning and producing

the show. And yet, there were other times when he opted to stay away for long stretches, leaving the daily grind of circus life to his brother and other trusted intimates, such as Concello. Always the consummate gentlemen, North relished his role as circus king and played it out to great effect with countless socialite friends and celebrities on both sides of the Atlantic.

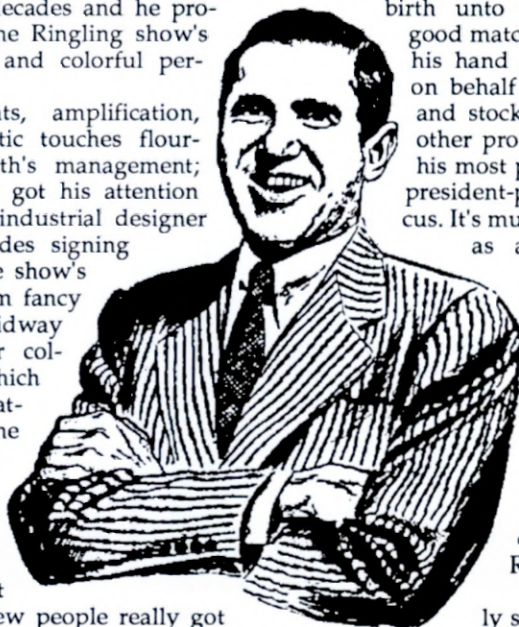
Ironically, though, as is clearly documented in *Big Top Boss* he was also quite shy and distant at times, rarely interacting—as was his brother's cherished habit—with his mammoth circus cast.

Reading this book, one comes to understand that North loved the good life and masterfully exercised his talents in this vein by pursuing it with admirable gusto and joy. Even when the circus was down on its knees financially, as happened at various intervals during his long reign, North never curtailed his grandiose ways or princely habits. After all he was an aristocrat, albeit circus royalty, and to himself was owed the privilege of living life accordingly.

Given his sharp mind, clever and dauntless negotiating skills, enthusiastic sales ability, and creative instincts, North would have survived and prospered at any number of professions, but his birth unto the circus was a good match for both. He tried his hand at real estate sales on behalf of his uncle John, and stock brokering, among other professions, but he hit his most productive stride as president-producer of the circus. It's much to North's credit

as a person that he was able to miraculously survive countless Ringling family ambushes that were repeatedly thrust upon him for control of the circus by various wives and children of the original Ringling brothers.

Not until he finally seized 51 percent of the circus' stocks in its waning big top days was North able to exert full administrative and creative control over the show. This was a long awaited, hard won battle for North who endured years of harassment from Edith and Aubrey Ringling and their respective families. Ironically, even today, his broth-





er, Henry, has only recently concluded a decades-long battle with Ringling heirs over the internment of John and Mabel Ringling's remains which until recently awaited at a tomb in New Jersey, their final resting place in Sarasota, some 50 plus years after their respective deaths. Those Ringlings, as this and many of North's earlier experiences proved, were a stubborn lot!

A lot of ground is covered in *Big Top Boss* regarding North's on again-off again relationship with Art Concello, the renowned circus flyer whose various flying acts—often featuring his triple-somersaulting wife Antoinette—were a Ringling staple for many years. Concello, of course, eventually became a circus manager—and sometimes owner—but devoted much of his managerial time to Ringling interests under the aegis of North. No question that North both admired and somewhat feared Concello, who singularly exercised great independence over and control of the Ringling circus. Knowing, however, that Concello, an innovator and doer, was one of the few people who could keep his show in tact and effectively move it on a daily basis, North enjoyed a long and mercurial relationship with Concello. In turn, the diminutive, tough-talking flyer, who some call the greatest circus manager ever—reportedly made a fortune off of the Ringling show and, at times, even bailed the show out when North was tapped out for money. It was Concello who lent North enough money to ultimately gain control of the circus. Hammarstrom does the definitive job of exploring the North-Concello relationship which lasted until North's death in 1985. (Concello, still alive and residing in Sarasota at a very ripe old age, still occasionally appears as a guest at local circus social events.)

One gets the definite impression from this book that while North truly loved the circus, his interest in it ebbed and flowed. He grew somewhat bitter toward America and preferred the notoriety and respect that European friends and society chums accorded him throughout his adulthood.

As the years wore on, his trips to the U. S. became less frequent, although he continued to enjoy recruiting talent from abroad for the circus. During the last decade of circus ownership, he stayed away, so it seems, ever



Frank Buck, Charles LaMaire and North reviewing costume sketches for the 1938 Ringling-Barnum spec. Pfening Archives.

more often, demonstrating just a passing interest in the show. He oversaw the launch of a European unit of Ringling, reports Hammarstrom, that Concello helped put together after much begging for his expert assistance by North. This tenure, in its first tour, attracted good crowds and appeared to have potential. But, ironically, North—who was passionate about the idea early on—apparently grew bored with the project as it evolved, and the resulting show, from all reports, was somewhat dismal and not up to the old Ringling production standards established by North and his uncles. Even his brother, Henry, according to the book, allegedly expressed concern over the low quality of the show.

North's dwindling interest in the European venture was, inexplicably, symptomatic of his complex personality. Al-

North and Norman Bel Geddes in 1941 with models of the circus of the future. Pfening Archives.



though he energetically endorsed the idea in the beginning, the resulting show, which he produced, must have embarrassed him enough to call it quits and yet he could have done it right from the beginning. This, however, was the way John North sometimes operated.

Consciously, or otherwise, he often fueled the show's political fires by making unfathomable management decisions. Appointing Michael Burke, an army buddy of Henry's completely unschooled in the ways of the circus, as show manager during some of the most critical big top years,

when the circus was reeling from expenses, competition, declining profits, and continual labor disputes, was a puzzling choice indeed (Burke, of course, ultimately quit and claimed that North stiffed him out of his sizeable severance pay despite previously agreeing to compensate him).

Not unlike his uncle John, North could sometimes be ruthless, even untrustworthy. More than once, he reneged on business deals and promises when it selfishly suited him. At his death in Switzerland, he was reportedly worth approximately \$100 million (most of the roughly 8 million he wangled out of Irvin Feld and partners for the show went into gold which later skyrocketed in price) and yet not a single penny was willed to his forever-loyal brother or adoring nephew, John Ringling II (Henry's son), who operated the brothers farm in Ireland. His longtime companion, Ida, inherited it all. Graciously, she made amends for his unexplained oversight by reportedly sharing her good fortune with both.

*Big Top Boss* is a compelling and thoughtful book about North which details his life, loves, and circus achievements as never before. Hammarstrom has done an outstanding job in pulling all the pieces of the puzzle together. Knowing that he'll never make a fortune writing a book like this, it's to Hammarstrom's great credit that he's approached his subject with the same meticulous and dogged commitment to fact and analysis that might be expected from a highly paid author. Obviously, Hammarstrom takes great pride in his work and this book shows it, with all of his credibility and fine writing style in evidence page after page.



One of my favorite chapters--although there are many personal favorites--is "Lost in the Press Kit." This details how North's legacy as circus king was quickly buried by the new owners who went on to tout themselves as the saviors of the circus and the new circus kings. All of this publicity hurt North immensely and with good cause. Among many fans and the public today, it's as if John Ringling North never existed. And yet, he was the sole president and producer of the circus for nearly a third of its existence and during some of its most successful seasons. When North got wind of the publicity which, by elimination of his name, helped to relegate his hard earned circus fame to no man's land, he amusingly noted that if Irvin Feld had to step in and save the circus then why did he have to pay so much money for the privilege! (Until his death, North, in addition to being paid for the circus, remained on Feld's payroll; Henry, still draws a salary and will until his death.)

Needless to say, there was no love lost between North and Feld (Feld, consistent with North's occasional behavior, reneged on various promises to North) over this and other matters, and North even contemplated buying back the circus at one point to preserve his legacy. Apparently, he thought better of it and instead, as age took its toll, resigned himself to a permanent, circus-less life in Europe, free at last of the headaches of the circus and family turmoil (other Ringling relatives retained a 49 percent interest in the show until Feld bought it) that haunted him until the sale papers were signed in Rome's Colosseum. Ironically, North, with his usual good luck and flair for timing (one of the few seasons that North was away from circus management) as a result of a family spat, was during the dreadful Hartford fire) had the last laugh on everyone, growing richer by the year as a result of his departure, on his death he left a fortune far greater than his very rich Uncle John could have ever imagined or known.

It's a shame that North and his brother, Henry, have not been accorded the same kind of recognition by circus fans, historians, and the industry that has been accorded P. T. Barnum, the Ringling brothers, and even the late Irvin Feld, whose circus producing career was far shorter and less diverse than North's.

There are no John Ringling North memorials, plaques or statues. No North exhibition halls or tributes. Not even a decent John Ringling North book, until now. Ironically, his memory is served in more subtle ways, though. For instance, the



The brothers North in 1941. Pfening Archives.

Ringling show format he innovated, replete with opening and closing costume parades, a singing ringmaster, a mid-show spectacle, an aerial ballet, and an elephant production number, was, until just a few years ago, still the creative backbone of Feld-produced shows.

One wonders if North, with a little more effort and commitment, could have kept the big top circus in tact long beyond

its closing in 1956. On that long, lonely and depressing train ride from its final big top stand to winter quarters in Sarasota, it was North alone who proclaimed that the circus under a tent was now a thing of the past. This writer thinks that North did the right thing at the right time, even if at the time it alienated a lot of people. Given its lumbering size, bulging expense and the growing dearth of suitable lots on which it could play, the death of the Ringling circus under a big top was inevitable.

Perhaps it could have lived on in this format for a few more years, but pulling the plug in 1956 and getting on with the show in another fashion was, in retrospect, a stroke of genius and good timing. A Ringling circus under a tent but diminished in size to cope with growing costs would have been a much worse choice.

Hopefully, the press, the public, and the circus fans will appreciate North's heretofore unheralded foresight on this and other circus matters, and once again familiarize themselves with this big top giant's imposing presence on 20th century America's flourishing circus scene, and that the name John Ringling North will ultimately find its rightful place in the annals of circus history. David Lewis Hammarstrom has done a great job of helping put John Ringling North, in all his rightful circus glory, back in the center ring. Jerry Digney

## JUST PUBLISHED **ANNALS OF THE AMERICAN CIRCUS** **VOLUME III 1848 - 1860**

In this, the latest (and last) of our series of books on the ante-bellum circus are chronicled the leaders of the institution: Rufus Welch, Spalding & Rogers, E. F. & J. Mabie, James Raymond and the Sands' group of impresarios. In addition, such phenomena as Franconi's Hippodrome, Barnum's Caravan, and the *Floating Palace* are described. Dan Rice's first shows are here, as are those of Joe Pentland, H. C. Lee, and Richard Risley. It was in this period that the circus reached the Pacific Coast and fourteen titles are documented. The railroad circus in its infancy (nine shows) is included.

The book has a 136 page narrative section, 147 pages of appendix (rosters and routes) and an 18 page index with over 1,000 names. Until January 1, 1993 the price is \$25, postpaid. Thereafter, it will be \$30.00. Available from the author:

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(Volume II still available \$30)



1891

**W**hen Sells & Andress played Clay Center in 1890, Willie left behind a good many unpaid bills--the newspaper, lumberyard, hotel and anyone else who provided him credit. When Sells Colossal came to Clay Center in 1891, the merchants were waiting. Attachments were filed on Willie's horses. The case came to trial in Justice Carter's court on September 29. Allen Sells attended the court and in the end paid the creditors.

At Smith Centre the *Pioneer-Bulletin*, the *Smith County Journal* and *Stewart's Bazar* all complained about the shell game that flourished on circus day, September 30. There are two essentials for profitable circus gambling, the protection of the show and the cooperation of town officials. The *Bazar* on October 8 presented the scandal as follows: "The city is without a marshal--Stonehocker having resigned. He handed in his resignation to Mayor Relihan which was accepted quick'n scat. We do not know whether Mr. Stonehocker was expected to take this step through fear that he would get the g. b. (sic) when the council met over his actions circus day--but this we do know an officer can't serve the city and at the same time accept a bribe from a black-leg gambler to run a nut-shell game."

The *Belleville Telescope* carried Willie's invitation for the public to "Come and see the grand spectacle of Cleopatra and her visit to Rome. Two hundred ladies and 300 gentlemen perform in this grand spectacle." It was a huge undertaking for a seven car show. Imre Kiralfy and Barnum had nothing on Sells Colossal, unless Willie was lying again.

The gamblers were active in Belleville. "The shell game at the circus last Friday [October 2] caught the usual number of victims, all the way from \$5 to \$20," according to the *Republic County Freeman*. "The principal shover of the shells was brought before Esq. Lacey and assessed \$25 and costs. He paid his attorney \$10 so he is not so very much better off than when he started in."

Following Belleville Sells Colossal disappeared into the wilds of Nebraska.

Two more Kansas towns were billed, Horton for October 9, and Holton, October 10, but both dates were blown when Allen Sells ordered the show to move directly from Pawnee City, Nebraska, to winter quarters in Topeka.

The *Horton Weekly Headlight* on October 15 reported that "Will Sells circus was a great big fake, and because he did not make money enough in Pawnee to pay his bills he missed Horton and went

# THE ONLY TRIPLE-HORNED UNICORN THE BIGGEST ORIGINALITIES

Chapter 7, Part Two  
By Orin Copple King

Copyright © 1990 Orin Copple King

on to Topeka. For once Horton is in luck, for it is said the concern is alive with blacklegs, thieves and bunco men. Several of his horses were attached at Beatrice for back salaries."

Advertising for Willie's show featured a number of titles and variations after returning to Kansas in August, all of which were designed to foster the impression that Willie's seven car show was the gigantic Sells Brothers circus of his uncles.

The season opened in Topeka under the

This Sells & Barrett ad appeared in the September 5 *La Cygne Weekly Journal*. Kansas State Historical Society.

## THE ONLY BIG SHOW COMING THIS YEAR!

Note the Date! Mark the Advent! Wait the coming of the big show at

**La Cygne, Wednesday, Sept. 9, '91,**



**SELLS' Great RAILROAD SHOWS,**

in mighty union with

**Barrett Brothers' Great World's Fair**

UNPARALLELED IN THE PAST OR PRESENT AGE



Positively the best equipped, most ably conducted, most complete and facilities union of enormous shows, of vigilant supervision and expert management. An irreproachable and deserving monument to progress and honest efforts.

**GREAT PACIFIC MENAGERIE AND MUSEUM!**

Lioness in its Special and European Equitation, Olympic, Aerial and Zoological attractions! European circuses contribute their

**VERY BRIGHTEST STARS**

A centralization of America's foremost performers, constituting a grand

**TRIPLE ARENA**

of inspiring feats and features.



**SELLS AND BARRETT ARE COMING**

with all of their superb and costly collection of horses, birds and reptiles, including the finest specimens of Hippopotamus, Rhinoceros, Giraffe, Sea Lion, and nearly every known species of animals. Lions, Bears, Hyenas, Tigers, Tapes, Horned Horses, Deer, Otters, Monkeys, GARDIA, etc. A GRAND TRAVELING ZOOLOGICAL GARDEN, showing to all the children in the land the most appropriate lessons in natural history it is possible to place before them.



Our GRAND STREET PARADE at 10 o'clock a.m. day of show. Performances at 2 and 8 p.m., daily. Cheap excursions on all railroads.

title of Sells' Colossal London Olympian Shows. This name was used in handouts at nearly every town and appeared in advertisements in the following towns: May 4 and 5, Atchison; August 13, Oswego; August 14, Cherryvale; August 15, Fredonia; August 17, Neodesha; August 18, Coffeyville; August 19, Independence; September 9, La Cygne; September 16, Wichita and September 26, Clay Center.

In a few towns more than one title was used. Sells United Monster R. R. Shows: July 13, Marshfield, Missouri; August 13, Oswego; August 14, Cherryvale and August 15, Fredonia; August

19, Independence and August 20, Chetopa.

Sells Big Railroad Shows: September 10, Pleasanton and September 15, El Dorado. Sells Big Shows: September 16, Wichita and October 10, Holton (Blown). Sells Enormous Circus, Museum, Menagerie, Caravan and Trained Animals: September 18, Lindsborg and September 26, Clay Center.

Sells Enormous Shows, Museum and Menagerie: September 22, McPherson. Sells Great R. R. Shows United with Barrett Bros. World's Fair: September 8, Olathe; September 9, La Cygne and September 26, Clay Center.

Sells' United Monster Railroad Shows in Mighty Union with the Barrett Bros.' Magnificent Musical Spectacle Cleopatra's Visit to Rome: August 18, Coffeyville; September 10, Pleasanton and October 2, Belleville. Sells' Monster R. R. Shows In Mighty Union with Pains' Mammoth Spectacular Extravaganza Entitled Cleopatra's Visit to Rome: August 20, Chetopa; September 22, McPherson.

Other variations appeared in handouts. Sells Bros. Big Show: August 12, Columbus. Sells' Monster Railroad Show and Clara Delorna's Exposition of Wild Animals: August 17, Neodesha. Sells' Big Railroad Shows and Barrett & Co.'s World's Fair: August 20, Chetopa. Sells' Bros. Big Railroad Circus and Performing Wild Animal Exposition: September 29, Phillipsburg.

In a few towns handouts referred to merely Sells' Circus: September 11, Garnett; September 14, Eureka; September 24, Alma; September 28, Clyde; September 30, Smith Centre; October 1, Mankato.

At Nickerson, September 17, the show had no name at all. Sells Colossal London Olympian Shows arrived in Topeka around 10 o'clock in the morning of October 9, via the Rock Island. The *Topeka State Journal* ran a story on the day of arrival that must have been the dying gasp of the show's press department: "Will



started his show out from Topeka last spring as a venture and it has been successful. All the large eastern cities were visited early in the season and since mid-summer the show has been in the west.

"The last three weeks' business has not been very heavy. Last week the show was in hard luck and had rain to contend with at every performance. The last performance of the season was given at Horton yesterday and the show is here for winter quarters.

"Since Will Sells left Topeka last spring he was married at Columbus, Ohio, and Mrs. Sells arrived in Topeka this morning with her husband's show."

The *Journal* on October 13 published the following story which is a reasonably accurate account of the situation:

#### "IN SAD PLIGHT"

Will Sells' Show in a Big Row With Employees.

Forty of Them Sue For Their Wages. The City Compelled to Shelter a Score as Tramps. The Men Bitter in Their Denunciation of Sells.

"The Sells shows reached Topeka Friday morning, and the employees, about forty in number, who have been working all summer, they say, on the promises of Will Sells, who assured them that 'when the show gets to Topeka every man will get his money and won't lose a cent,' are making a united move legally to get their money.

"Friday the employees were all cared for at the Chesterfield hotel, but Saturday morning they were turned away with nothing to eat and their wages unpaid.

"A council of war was held, attended by actors, advance men, hostlers, and stake drivers, all of whom have claims against the show ranging from \$10 to \$250.

"As a result of the council the employees in a body called on Col. Allen Sells, father of Will Sells, and laid their grievances before him. The elder Sells said, 'Well, boys, it is this way. Will hasn't got any money. Norris won't give up any, and I won't put any in the show, guess you will have to whistle.'

"A few minutes after this interview, it was rumored among the men that the show was to be taken to Kansas City where Sturdevant & Flinn's wagon show is and the two were to be consolidated as a railroad show, and taken to Texas for winter business.

"This was thought to be a scheme to get the show out of the reach of the men, and after another council they placed the matter in the hands of Attorney Henry L. Call and his assistant, F. J. Lynch.

"The attorneys at once commenced proceedings to keep the show in Topeka, and at ten minutes before 12 o'clock Saturday night Major T. J. Anderson, assistant gen-

eral passenger agent of the Rock Island, was called out of bed by Constable Ed. Davies of Justice Furry's court, who served papers garnisheeing the show on the Rock Island tracks, and about the same time Agent J. F. Gwinn, of the Union Pacific, was served with papers enjoining the Union Pacific from transporting the show.

"At 12 o'clock this morning, Constable Davies started out with his pockets full of subpoenas and summons, which he served on almost every man connected with the show.

"The attorneys went to police headquarters Saturday night, and appealed for the protection of the city for the unfortunate showmen, who had not where to lay their heads.

Sells ad in the *Lindsboro News* of September 18. Kansas State Historical Society.

"Twenty of the men were taken in, and were soon sound asleep in the steel cages on the wooden benches, and curled up about the corridors on the floor, using a pair of shoes or a coat for a pillow.

"They were given their breakfast and at dinner time an additional ten who had found other sleeping quarters were fed. These men are still on the public charity of the town.

"Among the unfortunates is O. J. Boyd, who has for over twenty years been a showman and at one time owned one of the largest wagon shows in the United States. Later he has been with John Robinson, O'Brien and Barnum, and the last season has been advance agent for Will Sells.

"Speaking of the present difficulty this morning he said: 'In all my show experience I never saw a lot of men treated as bad as these. The men have all believed what was told them, or the show would never have reached Topeka.'

"There is no excuse for Sells treating them in this way. John Murray, treasurer of the show and the old man's repre-

sentative, told me himself they could have settled all the claims for \$1,200 on Saturday, and I know that \$300 cash distributed among the working men on Saturday would have satisfied them; while the actors and other fellows like myself would have been happy if they would have only given us enough money to get out of town on and given us a note for the

balance. They owe me \$242, but I told Will this morning that if he would give me \$150 I would be satisfied, and that is not all. Down there on the track in one of those cars are two 'Albino' children that they left to starve. They did not have a bite to eat for a whole day. It is a regular confidence outfit. There is Norris, the dog man; he skinned Will out of \$25 before they started to skin the public.'

"Will Sells, when asked about the trouble, was not inclined to balk, but said: 'Oh, they are a hard lot of men to get along with. They don't want to go to Texas, is all's the matter with them. I did want to start out Saturday night, but guess we will have to stay here, now.'"

Sam McFlinn had for months tried to effect a merger with Willie's aggregation. On August 1, the *Journal* reported that, "A portion of McFlinn's circus, composed of two elephants, two camels, seven trained horses and a few other animals is at the stock yards near the Union Pacific freight depot. McFlinn's circus was here several years ago and did a profitable business back of the court house. It is re-

ported that Allen Sells will purchase the stock now here."

Nothing came of McFlinn's dream, luckily for him.

As reported earlier, Willie did return home with a bride, Effie Jean (or Effigene) Maris of Columbus, Ohio. She survived Willie by 16 years and died at Columbus, Ohio, July 2, 1924 a suicide, by drowning in a cistern.

The *Journal* on the 14th continued the

## SELLS' Enormous Circus!

Museum, Menagerie,

Caravan & Trained Animals.

Champion of Champions Headed By the Great and Only

WM. SELLS, KING OF ALL RIDERS!



50 The Largest School of Educated Dogs and Ponies 50 In The World!

JAS. BELL

Champion of all Hurdle and Bounding Jockey Riders. We Challenge the World to Produce His Equal.

-COMING-

In All Its Entirety and Splendor!

One Ticket Admits To all this Grand Entertainment

Grand Free Grand Pageant!

At 10 A. M. on Show Day. Remember the place, day and date: Lindsborg, Friday, September 18



story of Willie's employees. "BAD AS RUS-SIA. Half a Hundred Paupers On the Town. They Are the Employees of Will Sells Circus. While They Wait For Settlement of Their Claims, Shawnee County Furnishes Them With Their Meals.

"Sells circus employees who have been on the charity of the public since last Saturday morning, will to-night, for the first time since the show arrived in Topeka, have the privilege of going to bed with full stomachs.

"These men were kept at the city prison as tramps over Sunday and yesterday morning after breakfast were turned out.

"They had nothing to eat at noon yesterday, at night they found beds in stables and office hallways.

"Their attorney, Henry L. Call, hunted them all up this morning and gave them a banquet at a lunch counter. He then laid the matter before Poor Commissioner Hale, who has made provision to keep the men until they are able to get work or get out of town. He will furnish them beds and meals.

"Prof. Andrew Norris, the dog man, to-day employed Lawyer Call to commence action in his behalf against Col. Allen Sells and Will Sells.

"He says they have beaten him out of \$2,500, which he has put in the show at one time or another during the season.

"Judge A. Bergen is attorney for Col. Sells, and acting on his advice Col. Sells refuses to give bonds for any of the show property, as such an action would make him liable for the debts.

"Sturdevant and Flinn, whose show at Kansas City Sells was to have united with, telegraphed to-day that they were being placed in an awkward position, and insisted on Sells doing or saying something.

"The depositions of all the employees and all persons interested in the case will be taken at Call's office tomorrow morning."

Sheriff Carson of Smith county provided Willie with a bit of relief by taking 15 of the employees back to Smith Centre to face charges of grand larceny for stealing a box of cutlery valued at \$125 from a merchant. The cutlery was distributed among the employees.

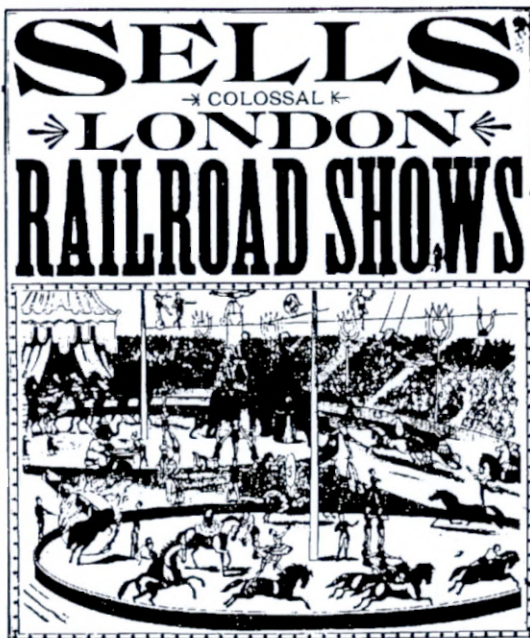
"Skinney," a man employed as Will Sells' "valet," according to the *Journal*, "says he has made arrangements to turn state's evidence and get out of the scrape."

Allen Sells and Willie stood firm in their resolve not to settle with their employees and the men slowly faded from the streets of Topeka.

It was a bad year for Willie. On December 12, the *Kansas Democrat* reported that, "The large boa constrictor belonging

to the Sells' show died yesterday, after fasting six months. The reptile could not be induced to take food."

Listed below are the confirmed Kansas dates for Sells Colossal London Olympian Shows in 1891: April 30, May 1, 2, Topeka; May 4, 5, Atchison; August 12, Columbus; August 13, Oswego; August 14, Cherryvale; August 15, Fredonia; August 17, Neodesha; August 18, Coffeyville; August 19, Independence; August 20, Cheyenne; September 8, Olathe; September 9, La Cygne; September 10, Pleasanton; Sep-



This illustration appeared in an 1891 Sells herald. Pfening Archives.

tember 11, Garnett; September 14, Eureka; September 15, El Dorado; September 16, Wichita; September 17, Nickerson; September 18, Lindsboro; September 19, Salina; September 22, McPherson; September 24, Alma; September 25, Manhattan; September 26, Clay Center; September 28, Clyde; September 29, Phillipsburg; September 30, Smith Centre; October 1, Mankato; October 2, Belleville; October 9, Horton, (blown); October 9, Topeka, Winter Quarters and October 10, Holton, (blown).

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To make an aside: I believe that the American circus peaked in the late 1880's. Willie Sells began circus management at about the same time that the circus began its slow decline. The decline was hardly noticeable to those living in Willie's time, but the seeds of destruction were beginning to sprout. Many reasons can be cited, but first let us consider the 20th century.

In this century there were obvious causes for the faltering of the circus. The auto-

mobile and the roads it required ended rural isolation, permitting the populace to see beyond the horizon a whole new world of wonders. It was no longer necessary to have a village every 20 miles. The general store at the crossroads could no longer compete with the metropolitan department store, and merchandise which at an earlier time brought excitement to the shopper became common place. Travel broadens.

Fewer suitable lots were available in the central neighborhoods of the larger cities. The circus was pushed farther and farther into the fringes. Trolley lines, paved streets and the automobile compensated somewhat, but at the same time created their own problems. The parade was hampered by congested traffic and the longer march required from a distant lot. Another factor affecting the parade was the emergence of a new concept of elegance. The last great splurge of 19th century circus elegance blossomed in 1903 with the return of Barnum & Bailey from Europe. It was evident by the end of World War I that the parade was over. The horse-drawn, iron-tired, overly-ornamented circus wagon became an anachronism. The circus parade failed to match the times.

The motion picture brought the circus a fierce competitor. There was a personal relationship, an intimacy, with the image flickering across the screen in the darkened theater. The darkness itself greatly facilitated the romantic dreams of the audience. With the proper amount of popcorn and the hand of a favorite girl the viewer had no trouble in finding a place for himself on the silver screen. There was no way the circus could equal the personal involvement of the movies.

The frozen format of the circus was also a factor in the slow decline. The manner of presentation seldom varied. One unrelated incident followed another, held together only by the music. The lighting was universally inadequate. The audience was too far from the action. The only truly effective aspect of the three ring circus was the overwhelming of the viewer by the sheer quantity of simultaneous performances.

Exaggeration has always been an ingredient in circus promotion, but there was nearly always a grain of truth hidden in the verbiage. A master like Barnum could inflate a fact with a touch of good-spirited license which in itself amused the reader. No one ever expected a circus to perform literally as the publicity described. The public wanted to believe and frequently did believe the showman's claims. If the exhibitions missed somewhat the magnitude of the showman's



claims, seldom was anyone injured and the disappointment was slight and soon forgotten.

The decline of the circus began with irresponsible men like Willie Sells. Willie, and others like him, believed that anything which separated the patron from his money was not only permissible but greatly desired. Gambling, fraud, short-changing, pocket-picking, physical violence, burglary, chicanery of any sort, and lies and more lies were believed essential for a successful season. The Willies of the circus world were blind to the success of Barnum & Bailey, Ringlings, W. W. Cole, the Sells brothers, Adam Forepaugh and others who made fortunes far exceeding the profits of a Willie Sells by treating the public with respect.

In the season of 1891, Willie lied outrageously about everything. He made every effort to convince the public that his little seven car show "in Mighty Union with Barrett Bros." was the huge and well-respected circus of the Sells brothers. Willie claimed a balloon ascension, a lion act and a spectacle involving 500 men and women--Cleopatra's Visit to Rome--all of which escape confirmation. Willie was out to kill the rube that brought the golden eggs. The result was financial suicide.

Naivety was a prominent characteristic of the 19th century Kansan, but even the rube (both urban and rural) eventually learned to avoid the likes of Willie. It became more and more difficult to lure the "suckers" to the slaughter and the number of shows on the road began to decline. The near demise of the American circus began with the likes of Willie Sells.

Under the tinsel there is a sadness, or at best a bitter-sweet world of illusion. There are people doing absolutely useless things requiring long years of practice, great strength and skill, and frequently the risk of death. In just a few minutes the performer is once again out of the ring and his moment of glory is ended.

And what remains? Materially, nothing. Spiritually, perhaps, quite a bit. A ten year old might come away with enough memories to last until Christmas. Parents might be grateful for a few minutes release from the chains of necessity.

The audience has always known that it

# COMING

ON THEIR OWN PALACE CAR.

NORRIS'

## Canine Paradox!

World's Novelty Show.

60 EDUCATED DOGS 60

FULL BRASS BAND  
AND ORCHESTRA.

15 Specialty Artists 15

ONE NIGHT ONLY,

Whitley Opera House.

WEDNESDAY,

November 4.

Prices, 25c, 35c and 50c.

Reserved seats on sale at the usual place.

could never walk a wire, throw a triple, command the lion, turn somersaults on the back of a horse or cause an elephant to stand on its head, but, for an hour or two, the public has done exactly that, while living in the body of the artist. It did not really happen. Or did it? The only reality of the circus is its unreality.

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Following the debacle with Sells Colossal London Olympian Shows, Norris took the road on his own as quickly as he possibly could, leaving Topeka on October 28. His first engagement was at Lawrence.

Prof. Norris' Canine Paradox played Emporia on November 4, 1891.

Norris ad that appeared in the Emporia Daily Republican on November 3, 1891. Kansas State Historical Society.

There are no reports on his reception at either Lawrence or Emporia, but Norris was on his way.

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Lemen Brothers' Monster Railroad Shows, Circus, Museum, Menagerie, "Ten Times Its Former Size," opened the season Monday, May 4, 1891, with a two-day stand in Argentine, Kansas, where they had spent the winter. "General Admission, 10 and 20 cents."

The Argentine Republic had nothing to say after the opening other than, "Lemen Bros. circus drew an immense audience on Monday evening, and they gave a good show."

Argentine is a cozy neighbor to Kansas City and it is quite probable that the show exhibited in Kansas City after the opening, especially so considering the use the press department made of a review ostensibly run in the Kansas City Times. The handout carries many of the marks of a press agent and may have been a total invention.

"LUCKY LEMEN BROS.

Their New Circus Combination Proves a Veritable Mascot.

"Ten thousand people cheered as never before at Lemen Bros. show last night. The great white tent was packed to suffocation, and still a crowd besieged the ticket wagon, which the police ordered

closed at a quarter of eight so fearful were they that a panic might occur. The surpassing merit of the Lemen Bros. was fully known here and all Kansas City was anxious to pay homage to a management that has created such a stir throughout the country. Those who were fortunate to gain admittance were abundantly rewarded. Blase show goers were dumfounded to find it is still possible to present entirely new and thrilling circus acts. The three rings and huge stage blazed with marvelous and perilous feats during the circus proper. The twenty-three horse act in the ellipse, and the hippodrome races, wrought the audience up to delirium of excitement.

"Lemen Brothers scored an unmistakable triumph here yesterday. Never before has a circus establishment given such thorough satisfaction in this city and for the first time has one religiously fulfilled its promises."

The day before the exhibitions on May 23 the Hiawatha World commented that, "Lemen Bros.' show Saturday, is said to be the best show in the west. Everybody will go because Saturday is a good day for a show."

After the show had come and gone the World firmly stated that, "The Lemen circus is a rotten outfit. People that gave up a cent to see such a show will be swindled. The men who run it are irresponsible and disconcerted. No more wretched circus outfit, little or big, ever struck this place. Most any two or three boys in this town could give a better show."

On another page the World pointed out that, "The Lemen Bros' circus was what Jim Haver and other good judges call rotten. Only a few men care to admit that they were foolish enough to pay 25 cents to see it, and only a very few did."

A different judgement was carried by the Kansas Democrat. "Lemen Bros' show pitched its tents in Hiawatha Saturday. There was a small attendance and the management lost money here. The show, however, was quite worth the price of admission."

In another column the Democrat reported that, "Lemen Bros. circus was wrecked Thursday [May 21] in St. Joseph but arrived on time Saturday."

A small two column ad announcing the exhibitions of June 13, appeared in the Pittsburg Daily Headlight on June 10. The only significant feature of the ad was an engraving of a marksman shooting from horseback. The illustration had been used many times by W. W. Cole and bore the caption, "Dr. Carver's Wild West shooting glass balls on horseback." Dr. Carver was not on the Lemen show.

"Saturday was an exceedingly lively



day here," according to the Pittsburgh *Smelter*. "Between the circus and the fact of its being Santa Fe pay day, the streets were literally crowded with people."

John J. Holland, advance agent, was in Galena on June 9, and placed ads in the *Galena Times* and the *Short Creek Republican* for the exhibitions of June 15.

The *Republican* optimistically proclaimed that, "Lemen Bros. circus and menagerie that showed at Joplin last week [June 11] will exhibit at this place Monday next. "This will undoubtedly be the best circus that has struck our city. Gaze on their ad elsewhere."

"Lemen Bros., circus was the best that has ever visited Galena," the *Republican* reported following circus day. "Their ring performance included many features different from the old stereotyped style; their costumes were neat and clean and everything connected with the show was first class in every respect."

"The elephant was the leading attraction for the boys in the circus parade Monday."

The only comment in the *Times* was that, "The 'young hopeful' who skipped out with the circus last Monday returned after one day's experience."

A new claim appeared in an advertisement in the Osage Mission (present day St. Paul) *Journal* on August 13 for the exhibitions of August 18. Beginning with this date the title was presented as,

"Five Continent Menagerie, in mighty union with The Great New York and New Orleans Shows. Monster World Fair, Zoological Institute, Triple Circus, Metropolitan Museum and Great Golden Menagerie."

During the season of 1892 the show openly proclaimed itself "Successor to W. W. Cole," but in 1891, the managers were content to use illustrations from the Cole show and the designation of "The Great New York and New Orleans Shows."

Following circus day in Osage Mission the *Journal* gave its readers some belated advice. "The usual number of fakirs were along with the circus Tuesday and flim-flammed some of the boys. All we have to say is 'don't monkey with the buzz saw' and in all cases don't bet on another man's game."

At Coffeyville, Lemen Bros. exhibited August 19, one day behind Sells Colossal London Olympian Shows. The conflict is related more fully in the section pertaining to Willie Sells.

The Coffeyville *Journal* of August 7 informed its readers that, "Lemen Bros. has

the largest elephant in the world. Prof. Martin's trained dens of lions. The only blood sweating hippopotamus together with all the other attractions. One cheap ticket admits to all." Nowhere is the price of "one cheap ticket" reported.

## THE BARNUM OF ALL 25 CENT SHOWS.

### Greatest Show on Earth for the Money!

**LELEN BROS.** Railroad Show, Free Horse Fair And Menagerie.



We Never Divide or Separate, will Exhibit in Its Vast Completeness

Hiawatha, Saturday, May 23.

The *Brown Country World* in Hiawathia, Kansas misspelled the Lemon show's title. Kansas State Historical Society.

When J. J. Holland, advance agent, and "a pleasant gentleman with whom it is a pleasure to transact business," called on the *Journal*, he inserted the following in the issue of August 14.

"WAIT! WAIT! WAIT!"

"All we ask of you is come and see our free street parade. It will speak for itself. We have not consolidated with any show. We have too good a show to consolidate with any inferior concern. We will be at Coffeyville, August 19th, and not before "Yours truly, LEMEN BROS."

Following circus day the *Journal* had much to report. "Prof. Will H. Phelps, a former employe of the *Journal*, and for some time an instructor in gymnastics in our city, was with the Lemen Bros circus. His performances on the flying trapeze last Wednesday were exceedingly fine, and called forth rounds of applause from the large audience."

Part of the glory of Circus Day rubbed off on "George Melville (who) fired the engine that pulled the show train to Coffeyville Wednesday. He called at THE JOURNAL office during his stay."

The following review appeared in the *Journal* on August 21: "Lemon Bros. Show.

"Lemen Bros'. Railroad show, advertised to appear here August 19th, one day later than the Sells show, came in on the 'Katy' on Wednesday morning. A report had preceded the show that it was a better outfit than the one which had exhibited the day before and a large

crowd gathered at the depot to see the show come in. All it needed was a good pair of eyes to see the difference between the two. The Lemen show came in on a fine train of their own. After their canvas was put up the parade took place, and it was indeed a fine affair and just as advertised. They had a fine band chariot, several cages of animals, a den of performing lions, and an enormous big elephant. The hundreds who saw it were satisfied and when the doors of the show were opened such a rush was never seen before. The ring performance was good, the menagerie was worth seeing, and the public was generally satisfied. There were no fakirs to bother, and those in charge of the affairs of the show were polite and attentive to all. Mr. Frank Lemen informed our reporter that he took in nearly a third more money than the Sells show during the day, and nearly two-thirds more at the evening entertainment. He thinks Coffeyville one of the best show towns in the state."

The *Parsons Daily Sun* carried the following story concerning the exhibitions of August 21: "Lemen Bros.' circus and menagerie exhibited here yesterday afternoon and gave a most creditable and genteel performance, much to the delight of a big crowd. Lemen Bros. have gotten together a fine array of talent and give an exhibition second to no show traveling in the west. . . . The heavy wind storm which struck the city shortly before 6 o'clock last evening blew down the tents and so disarranged everything that no exhibition was given last night and the show left for Chanute where they will exhibit to-day. Lemen Bros. may rest assured that they will be greeted with large audiences whenever they visit this city."

"The Suckers Are Not All Dead Yet," was the opinion of the Chanute *Blade* regarding circus day on August 22.

"The shell games and change racket was worked rather extensively in this city Saturday by the attaches of the Lemen Bros. circus. One man who was a caller at BLADE office during the day, but too poor to take a paper dropped \$20.00 on the shells. Another who is in arrears to the BLADE for three years subscription, but too hard up to spare the money to pay it dropped \$5.00, while several others



dropped from \$2.50 to \$40. It seems that some people never can or will learn anything but bite at every snap that comes along. The entire outfit was the worst lot of gamblers and fakes that ever struck the town."

It is probable that the poor editor himself deserved a listing on the roster of Suckers Still Living.

In some towns the parade was considered excellent but it was not the case in Junction City, August 24. The *Republican* described the parade as 'a laughable affair.' The company was obliged to hire horses from the livery stables to draw the wagons, and the guying the drivers got from the boys was a caution. It was the slimest procession that ever paraded through our streets. The ring performance, which was attended by large audiences afternoon and evening, was good, far better than many expected to see."

There is no explanation of the need to hire horses for the parade.

W. E. Hyre, contracting agent, was in Burlington August 12 and 13, and the *Republican* reported that he had a large bill board erected at the corner of Third and Neosho streets. Hyre also placed ads in the newspapers.

While the show was unloading in Burlington, August 27, Charles Lucand, a brakeman on the Katy railroad was caught between two flat cars and seriously injured. The Burlington *Independent* reported that, "He was taken to Parsons the same day and while in critical condition still there is strong hope for his recovery. His home is in Parsons."

"Lemen Bros. circus last Thursday was well patronized," according to the Burlington *Nonpareil*, "and the afternoon performance was well attended by a good sized crowd. The evening performance was not so well attended, but they took away a respectable sized pile of money for a very poor show. The street parade was the best feature about it, and that was slim."

An advertisement in the Humboldt *Herald* for the exhibitions of August 29, carried a cut of an unusual cow under the heading of "LIVING TWO HEADED COW." This is the only mention of such an attraction during the entire Kansas tour.

The editor of the Humboldt *Union* on September 5 wrote a review of the show in which he described his way of handling a short change artist.

"Lemen Bros. circus and menagerie (?) has come and gone, and like all other shows of that kind it had some good in it and a considerably of the bad. The circus performance was very good in same points but the animal show was thin in the extreme. Some of the attaches of the

show were 'on the beat' to an alarming extent. One of our citizens claims to have lost \$100 on the 'shell game,' and others lost small sums on the same swindling operations. We have no pity to offer any one who is foolish enough to bet on another man's game. They also worked the 'change racket' successfully in some cases, but in one they failed. They tried to swindle this party out of \$15.00, but he pulled

# At Last!

COMES THE

# BIG

# Show!

## Lemen Bros' Railroad Show

—CIRCUS—

Museum,  
Menagerie,  
Wildwest,  
Hippodrome



WILL EXHIBIT AT GALENA

Lemon ad used in the *Galena Short Creek Republican* on June 13, 1891. Kansas State Historical Society.

a revolver and told them they could take their choice, a dose of lead or give up the money. The money was returned. Don't monkey with the buzz saw."

Lemen Brothers in 1891, played the following confirmed Kansas dates: May 4, 5, Argentine; June 13, Pittsburg; August 18, Osage Mission; August 19, Coffeyville; August 21, Parsons; August 22, Chanute; August 24, Junction City; August 25, Council Grove; May 23, Hiawatha; August 26, Hartford; August 27, Burlington; August 28, Neosho Falls; August 29, Humboldt and August 31, Chetopa

Which show was it that had: "The Biggest Tents, The Biggest Trains, The Biggest Investment, The Biggest Ex-

penses, The Biggest Novelties, The Biggest Originalities, The Biggest Innovations, The Biggest Features, The Biggest Herds, The Biggest Pageants, The Biggest Hippodrome, The Biggest Caravans, The Biggest Amphibia, The Biggest Stables.

The biggest spectacles, the biggest menageries, the biggest circuses, the biggest aquarium, the biggest wild beasts, the biggest marvels, the biggest craze, the biggest holiday, bigger and better than ever, and absolutely THE ONLY BIG ONE COMING.

And all for only 50 cents! Children under 9 years, 25 cents!

An ad in the Ft. Scott *Weekly Monitor* on May 28 provided the answer. Sells Brothers' Enormous All-United Shows was coming to Ft. Scott, Saturday, May 30, 1891, "and none comes in June."

The reference to June pertained to a handout from the Adam Forepaugh Shows which was nestled directly against the Sells ad under the heading of "Coming Next Month." The story carried no date for the Forepaugh appearance, but it was August 6, before the Great Forepaugh Shows arrived in Ft. Scott.

The only performer mentioned by name was "Cyrene The Great, the world-famous pre-eminent enravishing emotional Spanish dancer."

Other features mentioned specifically were: "The only flock of full grown GIANT OSTRICHES Ever publicly exhibited.

**"Absolutely the only Living full-grown \$10,000 GIANT MALE AND FEMALE HIPPOPOTAMI To Be Seen Any where Together.**

The only pair of LILIPUTIAN CATTLE Smallest and cunningest bovines ever seen on earth.

"Only wild Australian HAIRLESS HORSE. More marvelous than the Centaur."

Everything else was merely the biggest and the grandest. It was claimed to be "A MILLIONAIRE ALLIANCE!," but generously featured was a "FREE STREET PARADE!"

The *Monitor* on the 28th hinted at a confrontation that was not mentioned again and probably never occurred. "The probabilities are that there will be lively times in town Saturday when the show 'parades.' Sells brothers will have the procession of course, but Forepaugh's will join the sport with several big advertising cars which are now being constructed for them."

Ft. Scott had two parades on May 30, Sells in the morning and a traditional Memorial Day procession to the cemetery at 2:00 p. m.

The following is undoubtedly the work of a press agent: "The Great Shows.



"Since the death of Barnum the query has been often made who will be the next great showman, but it is a question whether this will long remain a matter of doubt. Saturday Sells Bro's appeared in this city and gave an afternoon and night performance which was equal to any show in completeness and novelty that ever visited the city. Their street parade was in itself a complete show, and was a truthful forecast of what was to come. Limited space forbids an extended notice in detail, but the menagerie merits the highest commendation because of its magnitude and numerous novel features. In the great tent the attractions were novel, remarkable physical feats, splendid exhibitions of equestrianism and leaping. The MONITOR desires to remark in this connection that from a moral standpoint the Sells Bro's have come as near eliminating everything objectionable as possible, and their show is a useful and instructive combination of talent in all that goes to make up a great show. Referring to the fact that the day was decoration day Mr. Sells expressed regret that he did not know there was a National cemetery near this city, as he should have made arrangements to have made it on another day. It was far from his thought to use the day here to fill his circus."

Sells brothers and anything and anyone connected to them had been of prime interest in Topeka ever since the October day in 1876 when The Great European Circus came crawling into town to bed down for the winter. The *Topeka State Journal* on February 6 carried the following sad news: "ARCHIE SHIELDS DEAD. A Veteran showman dies in Topeka this morning."

"Archie Shields, a veteran showman, who has for years been boss canvassman with Sells Brothers circus, died at 6:30 o'clock this morning at the residence of Richard Dunbar, corner of Fifteenth and Quincy, of congestion of the liver."

Shields was about 55 years of age, and had been in the show business all his life. At different times he was with Forepaugh and Barnum, but for several years past had been with Sells Brothers.

"He has several friends in Topeka, and has been visiting here since the show season closed."

Charles Stow, advance agent, was in Topeka May 12, placing advertising and making preparations for the exhibitions of June 2. The following day the advertising car arrived. The *Topeka Daily Capital* on May 14 described it as "the most beautiful circus car on the road, being artistically painted with scenes from the show. Peter Sells, one of the proprietors, accompanies the car. The whole party of twenty-four men stopped at the

Chesterfield and will leave this morning for Hilton."

Allen Sells was proprietor of the Chesterfield hotel.

In several handouts in Topeka papers the Sells brothers implied that an unnamed competitor, which could not have been any other than Barnum and Bailey, intended to "revolutionize the show business" by "the introduction of licentious and indecent spectacles." The condemned spectacle could have been nothing other than "Nero and the Destruction of Rome."

A handout in the *Kansas Democrat* of May 21 proclaimed the intention of Sells Brothers to "keep within the legitimate scope of zoological and arenic displays and not sacrifice the most popular elements of tent exhibition to 'innovations,' which have usurped the legitimate and belong properly to Black Crook brass and nudity."

It was just the Sells Big Show for the September 16 stand in Wichita. Kansas State Historical Society.

The *Black Crook* was a "naughty" theatrical production that prospered by revealing the stockinged lower limbs and corseted bosoms of their plump and sexually exciting beautiful young actresses.

Sells Brothers promised to eschew all immoral and suggestive presentations. "This," according to the handout, "makes their present enormous unity of hippodrome, menagerie, circus, wild Moorish caravan and

spectacular pilgrimage to Mecca, tropical aquarium, aviary, royal Japanese troupe, Arabian Nights entertainment and magnificent free street parade altogether the best and most satisfactory of its kind. It includes, moreover, many exceedingly rare and interesting sights nowhere else exhibited, such as the huge living hippopotami, a whole flock of ostriches, the hairless horse and the pair of Lilliputian cattle. Among scores of the greatest performers also appears Cyrene, the extraordinary Spanish dancer in long skirts,

whose picturesque and emotional presentations have made her the public craze wherever she has appeared."

It will be noted that Cyrene danced in long skirts and presumably the chaste and pure town wives were spared embarrassment. But when the long skirt flew about like a spinning top was there not a ripple of lust in the lecherous hearts of the husbands?

In a different handout it was stated that, "The newly devised spectacle of the

pilgrimage to Mecca will introduce many rich, striking and romantic novelties." The spectacle, it is assumed, was "legitimate" and offered no "Black Crook" brass and nudity."

The season of 1891 was strongly touted as the twentieth season of the always successful Sells brothers. A handout in the *Democrat* proclaimed: "Other shows may come and go, but Sells Brothers Enormous United Exhibitions, like Tennyson's Brook, seem destined to 'go on forever.' They have already been under one and the same ownership and management longer than any other similar enterprise now in existence, and their continual increase in size, attractiveness and popularity is a fair sign of health and longevity. The Messrs. Sells are legitimate, enterprising showmen, and honorable man, with whom it is both pleasurable and profitable to do business. . . . They manage it in person and obtain universal popularity and patronage."

In conclusion the Sells brothers could not resist

taking another swipe at Barnum & Bailey.

"The nomadic Pecksniffs who, under the sniffling pretext of morality, substitute immoral apings of ancient debauchery for first-class circus performance, may well profit by their example, and abandon their more than questionable efforts to 'revolutionize the show business.'"

Sells Brothers exhibited in Kansas City, Missouri on June 1. A story in the *Kansas City Times* helps explain the events of circus day in Topeka, June 2.

## SELLS BIG SHOW, AT WICHITA Wednesday September 16



Champion of champions from every clime. The leading lights of the arenic world. Nothing like it in the history of amusement enterprise. An enterainment for ladies and children. The first big show to visit this city at popular prices.



A most Novel and Unique Parade will take place at 10:30, Wed. Sept. 16th. Performances at 2 and 8 p. m. daily. Note our Low Price of Admission: Only 25 Cents.

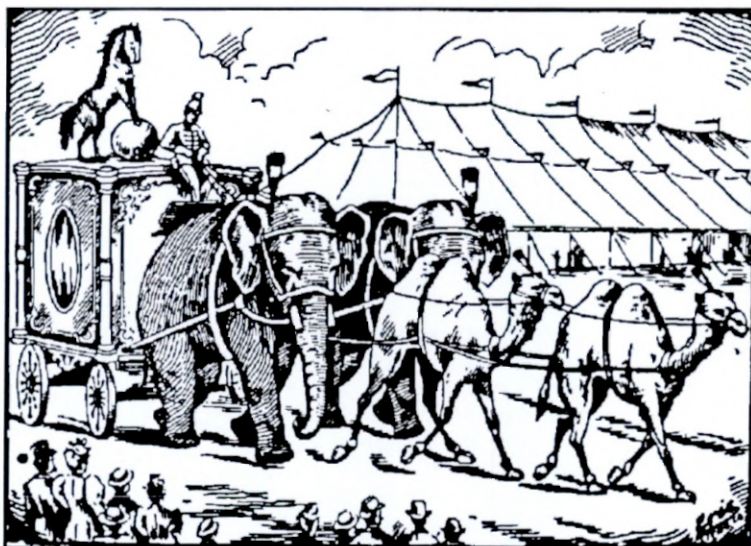


"It was a circus in a rainstorm and the multiplied attractions of two rings and a stage full of performers at the same time were scarcely less interesting than the play of the torrents. The performance was about one-third passed when the rain began to beat upon the canvas. But what of that? Were not the spectators and performers alike within the shelter of the tent? No one became excited for a time save the peanut and lemonade venders, who at once put by their regular stock, and as if by magic appeared with great bundles of 50 cent umbrellas, mostly made of dye, which they sold at \$1 each. There seemed little significance in this change of tactics but for the continuous zeal of the peddlers. But they knew their business. The canvas once soaked was little protection. Those who had brought umbrellas with them hoisted them and those who snubbed the venders on their first appearance called eagerly for their wares. The rain continued and so did the performances. The numerous actors paid no heed to the prevalent moisture but like seamen bold faced the elements, and true to their art exposed their bare arms or be-tighted legs to the rain. Even the master of ceremonies, true to his professional dignity, stood on the stage and the judges stand with uncovered head, while the drip of the tent soaked his heavier garments and caused his linen to relax. Wire walkers, ladder performers, trapeze experts and bareback riders continued their hazardous vocations regardless of the added danger from wet appliances. The baggy costumes of the clowns clung to them like wet sails to a mast. The ground which had been softened by Sunday's rains soon presented the appearance of a swamp. The laborers dug holes in the yielding soil to drain the race track, but the holes were soon filled and ashes but recently placed on the track were quickly submerged. Those occupying the upholstered (?) reserved seats, folded them and stood upon them under dripping umbrellas that protected them, while they directed little streams of June rain down their neighbor's backs. One lady, whose foot had been pinched by a newspaper man in front of her when he unfolded his reserved chair, almost clapped her hands in glee as she saw the rich black fadings of a neighbor's umbrella making tracks down the back of the newspaper man's laundered linen coat.

"Just when it began to look as though boats would be necessary to a safe escape,

the races were announced. People in the front rows next the track shuddered in anticipation of mud baths as the gong sounded for the first contestants. One after another the races were run until instead of standing water the track was covered with thin mud with no particular bottom. Not even the elephant race was omitted, and the huge monarches of the jungles literally wiped up the earth as they ran an alleged race of once around the track. Last of all came the chariot race, with two chariots of four horses each, one driven by a stalwart young charioteer and the other by a Juno like woman with a defiant smile that seemed to portend victory. She alone of all the performers took visible notice of the all-pervading co-ziness. She had covered her previously exposed Venus di Milo shoulders, neck and arms with a gossamer. The horses were turned loose, and as they dashed around the circle followed by the yells of the momentarily forgetful crowd, they were followed by a fine mud spray that settled in monotonous shade over the people in the front row and over the forms of the charioteers. Thus ended the Sells' Bros. circus.

"Then followed an interesting after-piece which might have been fitly entitled, 'Stuck in the Mud, or He, We Got



Away.' It was impossible to reach the main exit without wading in water to the instep. Many waited, many debated and others plunged recklessly. There was a fluttering of white laces, a blushless display of ankles and a foolish bedraggling of skirts. All finally made their escape to terra firma, but not without wet feet and other marks of the voyage."

The show was scheduled to come to Topeka on the Rock Island, but the heavy rain had washed away several bridges and it was necessary to travel over the Santa Fe. The show arrived at noon.

Topeka also suffered from heavy rains complicating movement over the city streets. "Several of the heavy wagons," according to the Topeka *State Journal*, "stuck in the mud on Kansas avenue south of Tenth street, and the mud had to be shoveled off the wheels before they could be moved. The elephants were brought into service and helped to push the wagons through the mud.

"One large wagon broke down on the street-car track and was pushed aside until the tents are up."

The parade was given at 3:30 and the matinee cancelled. An immense audience attended the evening performance.

The performance as reported by the *Democrat* opened with "a troupe of Bedouin Arabs, wild Moors and Berbers from their native country in a realistic portrayal of their pilgrimage to Mecca; the only male and female hippopotamies (sic), the horizontal bar business of Petit, McVey, Ryan and Zorrella, the five-horse tandem menage riding, over gates and hurdles, trained by Allen Sells (not the Topeka hotel man) and ridden by Albert Weitzel; Cyrene, the great Spanish dancer; the daring ladder climbing by the Imperial Japanese troupe; the daring and graceful feats on a bareback horse by Miss Polly Lee; the dashing bareback equestrianism by Miss Daisy Belmont, William Showles and William Dutton; the Roman gladiators by the Gilford Brothers; Hadj T. Ben Mohamed and Hasson Ben Alis, Moorish and Bedouin troupe of Arabs, in native songs, dances, tumbling, vaulting, fencing, gun spinning, etc.; elephant race, clowns carnival race, Roman standing race, oriental camel race, four-horse Roman chariot race, and many others.

"The show was obliged to cancel a date for a Nebraska point and left here this afternoon [June 3] for Horton."

The above mention of the hippotomi raises the question of their presentation. Did they waddle around the track or were they in a wagon?

The June 3 *Journal* ran the following: "The Circus.

"After missing two performances, the evening one at Kansas City Monday night and the one in the afternoon at Topeka yesterday, on account of the rain, Sells brothers big canvas was nearly filled with six or seven thousand people last evening.

"The great tent showed the effect of its recent encounters with Kansas rain-



storms. It was soggy with water and streaked with mud, but the brisk breeze swelling its vast expanse was rapidly drying it out.

The tents were allowed to stand all night to dry out. The tract of ground near Topeka Avenue, where the tents were erected, was found to be so muddy that it was impossible to throw up new rings and the circus tent was so pitched that the arenas used by other circuses could be used. This made it necessary to put the stage at one end instead of in the middle, and the netting for the trapeze performance extended partially over one ring, interfering considerably with the first equestrian performance, until it was finally removed.

The reserved seats, upholstered with brussels carpet, were dripping with water, and many a man, and woman, too, who sat down without examining the seats, hastily arose with queer expressions on their faces. Many light summer dresses will go to the laundry to-day in consequence. The majority of the occupants of the seats closed them up and sat on top of them.

The horses soon converted the rings into a veritable mire, and all the equestrian acts were more or less failures on account of the mud. The performers were compelled to wear rubbers from the dressing room to the arena. The performance in spite of all these drawbacks was excellent, comprising hundreds of first-class acts.

The newest and best feature of the show is the exhibition of the troupe of Bedouin Arabs with their wild dancing accompanied by their own musical instruments. The gun spinning by one of the members of this troop was the finest thing of the kind ever seen in Topeka.

The skirt dance of Cyrene the Spanish dancer was also a distinguishing part of the show. Cyrene is exceedingly picturesque and graceful, and her artistic dancing was a pleasing innovation in circus performances.

"Altogether the big audience was well satisfied." Sells Brothers, as usual, stand in the front rank of amusement purveyors. The managers of the show are to-day making an effort to change their extremely bad luck of the past few days.

Their show is advertised to appear at Pawnee City, Nebraska, to-day and at Horton to-morrow, but the crowd of Nebraska humanity who 'Wait for the circus,' at Pawnee City today will be disappointed, for the circus will not go there at all.

The Sells Bros. changed their plans last night and decided to lay over to-day and rest the men and horses who were worn out with all night work and going almost without food for two days. The tents were not taken down last night and all hands rested. This morning the show was loaded on the Rock Island tracks and went to Horton this afternoon where they will rest tonight and show to-morrow.

The amount of their financial losses of the last two days has not been made public, but one of the managers said today: 'A show with less money than Sells' Bros. have at their command would have stranded in Topeka, but this is our first bad luck since our experience with the



the cyclone at Clinton, Ohio, and the end of the season will find us all right."

Charles Stow called on the Horton *Commercial* May 11. "He is an old newspaper man, and an all-around good fellow. If the show comes up to the standard of the advance man, it's all right."

Willie's use of the Sells' name even so early in the season, was such that the *Commercial*, probably at the instigation of Stow, reported May 14, that, "Some of our citizens have been under the impression that the circus to be here on the 4th of June, is the little one-horse show that started from Topeka this spring. Such is not the case. It is the great and only Sells Bros. Mammoth Consolidated Shows, which has been on the road for years, and gained a reputation as being second to no show traveling. Read their big advertisement in this issue."

A "large corps of billposters" visited Horton during the week of the 28th and "rebilled where the heavy rains had washed their paper down."

The Horton *Weekly Headlight* after the circus had come and gone reported, "The Circus.

"Despite the stormy looking weather last Thursday, early morn soon brought

large crowds of people to Horton to see Sells Bros. circus and menagerie. The parade was one of the best ever made in this section of the country, and was over a mile in length--and the wagons not strung out a block apart either. In the afternoon the large circus tent was crowded and it is estimated that over 5,000 people were under the canvas. The menagerie was good, the circus better, and the hippodrome best. But it remained for Cyrene, the Spanish skirt dancer to bring forth cheer upon cheer by her graceful, and yet what seemed superhuman dancing. She is grace in all her movements, while she handled the long skirts with an ease and skill that only one who has made it a study can do.

"In the evening the crowd was not so large yet the tent was fairly filled. The em-

ployes of the show are all pleasant people and have none of that Lord-of-all style so peculiar to circus people. The treasurer informed us that Horton was the only town the show had struck for a week and made expenses, not excepting Topeka or Kansas City."

The *Commercial* echoed the opinion of the *Headlight*, but added a few details:

"But few thieves and fakirs follow Sells Bros.' show. Aside from the regular prohibition drunks, and one or two rows among members of the show, there was but little disturbance."

A "little disturbance" was reported in a different column. "A serious shooting and cutting affray took place in Horton last Wednesday among the hobo gang with Sells circus. A white man by the name of Charley Stark became involved with a Negro called 'Yellow Joe.' Stark pulled a jack knife and began slashing at the Negro, who in turn pulled a revolver and sent a bullet through Stark's side. Only painful flesh wounds were inflicted. Both were turned off by the managers of the show, and have since left town."

The last word on Sells Brothers in Kansas in 1891, appeared in the *Humboldt Union* on June 13 and proved that the honest folks of Yates Center and Humboldt could not be fooled.

"Sells Bros., the Kansas showmen, are introducing Major Willie Ray and wife as the 'Count and Countess DeRay,' who were recently married in Paris.' Yates Center people remember to have witnessed the marriage in their city some months ago, and our citizens are aware that they were in Humboldt two or three weeks enjoying their honeymoon. But



On Free Exhibition!

LOUISIANA TWINS, BORN ALIVE  
TO BE SEEN AT  
DR. HUNTER'S OFFICE CAR,  
AT SANTA FE DEPOT.

FREE CONCERTS EACH NIGHT.



MARION, SEPTEMBER 1-10 7 INCLUSIVE.

DR. HUNTER, Famous Physician and Surgeon, will remain until Sept. 10 inclusive. Don't fail to consult him while you have a chance. An opportunity seldom met with in a lifetime. Consultation and examination free. Office Car at Santa Fe Depot.

Dr. Hunter's Louisiana Twins were advertised in the August 21, 1891 Marion Record. Kansas State Historical Society.

then the attraction would be small unless the name was prefixed by 'Count.'"

You can fool some of the people some of the time, etc.

hattan. The free concerts not only furnish free amusement to the multitudes every night, but the doctor performs free cures, free surgical operations, etc. Among the

\*\*\*\*\*

Dr. Hunter of Washington Brothers, Hunter's Railroad Circus, Hunter's Consolidated Shows, Hunter's Amphitheatre in Pittsburg and perhaps other malodorous enterprises was on the road in 1891 dispensing miraculous cures for all the ills of mankind. The Marion Record ran two handouts previous to the arrival of Dr. Hunter's Office Car.

"Dr. Hunter and his Office Car have been on the Rock Island side track all this week. His concerts are immense and he has a change of programme each night. He also performs free cures on the stage each night. Up to time of going to press he had performed several surgical operations and has given entire satisfaction. His charges are moderate.-White City Register."

"Dr. Hunter has proven himself a public benefactor since coming in Man-

many whom the Doctor has operated upon in this city alone for crossed eyes are the following: Misses M. Howel, R. Pea and Lewis and Joseph Sharpless. This is the second visit of Dr. Hunter to our city.—Manhattan Mercury."

The famous physician and surgeon and charlatan ran an ad in the Record on August 21 illustrated with an engraving depicting the "Louisiana Twins, Born Alive. To be seen at Dr. Hunter's Office Car, at Santa Fe Depot, September 1 to 7, Inclusive."

Though "Born Alive" there is no indication that they were still alive in 1891. Considering the doctor's previous displays of conscience the twins could have been alive, embalmed, pickled, or imaginary. The Marion Record offered no comment.

Research funded in part by grants from Wolfe's Camera and Video. Topeka, Kansas.



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Route book **Barnum & Bailey In the Old World 1897-1901**, by Harvey L. Watkins. Superb 108 page 7 1/2 x 11" book. (Minimum bid \$100)

Route book **Barnum & Bailey 1903-1904**. Compiled by Charles Andress. 6 1/2 x 10 1/2", 112 pages.

Route book **Barnum & Bailey 1906**. Compiled by Charles Andress. 182 pages cloth bound, 6 1/2 x 8 1/2" Pages 15-16 loose, otherwise good.

Route book **Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Shows 1897**. Hard bound 134 pages, 7 x 10 1/2"

Sealed pack of playing cards, **Carl Hagenbeck-Wallace**, as presented by management.

Mail bids will be received until September 20, 1992.

Betty Schmid  
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# Mike Martin's CIRCUS HOBBY HALL

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PKG. # TWO: 7 colorful seasons from Beatty-Cole, each loaded w/photos from this mammoth 3 Ringer - 1964 - 1966 - 1968 - 1972 - 1973 - 1974 & 1975 Set includes the last year Mr. Beatty worked.

*7 Mint Programs - \$18.50 plus \$3.00 Shipping*

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# CIRCUS HOBBY HALL

PKG. # THREE: 7 photo loaded editions of Circus Vargas from the shows hey-day as "America's Big Top Giant" - 1975 - 1980 - 1983 - 1984 - 1986 - 1988 & 1989.

*7 Mint Programs - \$18.50 plus \$3.00 Shipping*

PKG. # FOUR: Ringling/Barnum, 7 glorious seasons - including the last full year under canvas - 1955 - 1959 - 1962 - 1963 - 1964 - 1965 & 1966.

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### **D** R/B CIRCUS WORLD MATERIALS

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# CIRCUS LIFE AND ADVENTURE OF ADAM BARDY

This beginning adventure was of very short duration, as Adam met up with gypsy fortune tellers the very next day, and, in their generosity, they gave Adam trolley car fare money, and Adam returned home.

In Adam's teenage years, he lived with woodchoppers in shanties in the woods, and finally in a deserted farmhouse. At the age of seventeen, Adam joined the Ringling Bros. & Barnum and Bailey Circus. Other large and small circuses were to be Adam's life, until, in 1929, Adam met up with Kentucky Mountaineers, and the life of a bootlegger was to begin. A thrilling adventure as a big-time bootlegger was Adam's lot in life, until the Conn. State Police wiped out the operation. Adam escaped from custody, and a fugitive's existence lasting seven long years began. During this time, Adam learned all about fortune telling, a life he followed for many years. After that seven years, Adam gave up and turned himself in to the police. He went on to raising beautiful meat and show rabbits, and became New England's largest rabbit breeder. Then he went back to doing character readings, using palm readings and handwriting analysis by mail.

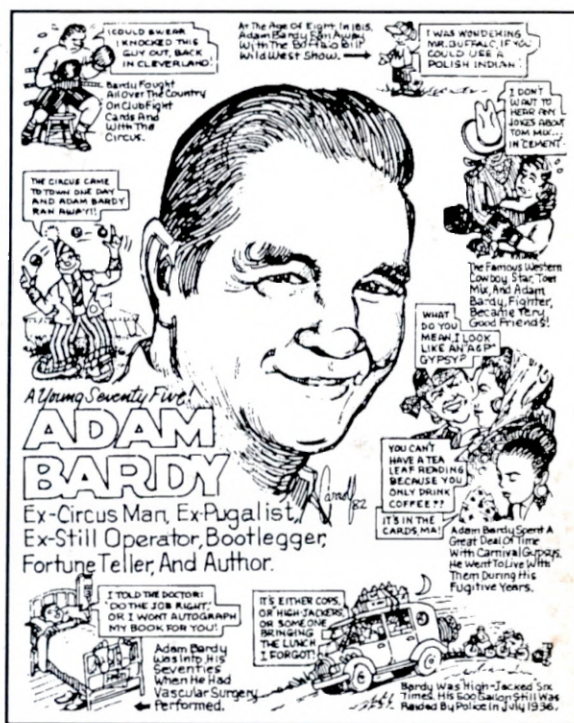
But, of all Adam's adventures, his memories of circus life were the best, including the opportunity to have had personal mends like the great Tom Mix, who joined the Sells-Floto Circus when Adam was with that circus in 1929, and Adam's interest in boxing, which his good friend Tom Mix really loved.

And now, as Adam lives his quiet life out in the country, he has written an interesting book that tells of his forty-seven years with his wonderful late wife, Ann, who was a devoted and loving mate. The story tells of what it was like to live with a fugitive and bootlegger husband all those years, and then of her passing in 1980. Adam recounts his loneliness for three years. Adam continues his story by telling how the palmistry reading of a young twenty-one year old girl blossomed into a wonderful friendship of true love and romance, as it can come to one who has lived an adventurous, interesting life. The story explains how, through deep faith in God, Adam could live this strange, unusual and interesting life, so full of excitement, and still remain the happy-go-lucky person he still is. Adam credits all this to the guiding hand of God.

The interesting life story of Adam includes that of his close companion, twenty-two year-old Terry Lyn Bates. Her story alone is well worth the price of the book, as one can see that age alone is not what counts, but the way we live our lives.

The book includes many pictures that tell the life story of Adam. For an autographed copy of *Circus Life and Adventure of Adam Bardy*, send check or money order for \$12.95 to:

Every so often, story books are written that tell of someone who has lived an interesting and adventurous life, and there are times that some local person may come along who has experienced such an adventure in his life's journey. Of local interest is the story of Adam Bardy, who began his "adventure" in 1915, at the age of eight, running away with the great Buffalo Bill Wild West Circus, when the Circus was playing in his home town of Webster, Mass.



**ADAM BARDY**  
87 Alm Rd.  
Thompson, CT 06277